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ABSTRACT

In December 2000, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) began working with low-performing districts and schools as part of a 5-year research and development effort to create and refine a systemic model for improving student achievement in reading or mathematics. SEDL hypothesized that as districts and schools increase their capacity to work systemically, student achievement will increase. This report is the first look at these districts and schools after 1 or 2 years of work with SEDL, depending on when the site was recruited. The purpose of the report is to describe the progress of work and issues that have emerged as SEDL implemented its Working Systemically model. The findings are based on analyses of site contact records and two rounds of interviews conducted with administrators and teachers in these districts and schools. The findings suggest that SEDL and the 16 districts and 29 schools have made some progress in implementing the model. The majority of activities undertaken by the districts and schools focus on some combination of standards, curriculum and instruction, and assessment. The remaining districts and schools are attending to other priorities and will require assistance from SEDL to connect their activities more directly to student achievement. Appended are: Site Contact Record; Interview Protocols; Profiles of Sites; and Additional Data Summary tables. (Contains 19 tables, 3 figures, and 35 references.) (Author)

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# The Development and Refinement of SEDL's *Working Systemically* Model

ED 480 278

**FY02 REPORT**

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# The Development and Refinement Of SEDL's *Working Systemically* Model FY02 Report

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## Executive Summary

In December 2000, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) began working with low-performing districts and schools as part of a five-year research and development (R&D) effort to develop and refine a systemic model for improving student achievement in reading or mathematics. The Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin partnered with SEDL on this work, with support from American Indian Research and Development. SEDL hypothesized that as districts and schools increase their capacity to work systemically, student achievement will increase. This report is the first look at these districts and schools after 1-2 years of work with SEDL, depending on when the site was recruited. The purpose of this report is to describe the progress of work and issues that have emerged as SEDL implemented its *Working Systemically* model. The findings are based on analyses of site contact records and two rounds of interviews conducted with administrators and teachers in these districts and schools.

The findings suggest that SEDL and the 16 districts and 29 schools (one to two schools in each district) have made some progress in implementing the model. The majority of the districts' and schools' activities focus on some combination of standards, curriculum and instruction, and assessment. For example, some districts and schools are diligently identifying and addressing gaps in their instructional programs to better meet student needs. The remaining districts and schools are attending to other priorities (e.g., stakeholders' expectations, vandalism, and violence) and will require assistance from SEDL to connect their activities more directly to student achievement. In addition,

activities are occurring at multiple levels of the system (i.e., district and school), although in most cases, these activities are not connected among levels.

Testing this model in this sample of low-performing districts and schools has provided SEDL with the opportunity to learn how its model performs and make necessary refinements. SEDL has made modifications to the recruitment process, the sequencing of activities at the district and school levels, and specific protocols to tighten their focus and interconnections. Testing this model in these sites also has led to the identification of two issues that were not explicitly addressed in the model: leadership capacity at the district and school levels to support reform and the expectations that district and school administrators and teachers hold for students. Additional consideration is needed to determine how to reconcile these issues within SEDL's model.

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# 1. Introduction

In December 2000, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) was awarded a 5-year research and development (R&D) contract to develop and refine a systemic model to improve student achievement in reading and/or mathematics in low-performing districts and schools (SEDL, 2000a). The Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin partnered with SEDL on this work, with support from American Indian Research and Development.[1] SEDL also received funding to conduct a research study to assess the impacts of this model in increasing districts' and schools' capacities to work systemically, and, in turn, to increase student achievement in reading and mathematics. Three questions were identified to direct this research:

- To what extent are low-performing districts and schools increasing their capacity to work systemically?
- What strategies contribute to increasing the capacity of low-performing districts and schools to work systemically?
- Does student achievement increase as districts and schools increase their capacity to work systemically?

These three research questions test the hypothesis that student achievement will increase as districts and schools increase their capacities to work systemically (SEDL, 2000b).

The first year report (SEDL, 2002) described the procedures used to identify and recruit sites in SEDL's five-state region. It also provided demographic and other descriptive information on the sites. This second year report examines SEDL's early work with these districts and schools in developing and refining its *Working Systemically* model. This report describes the activities undertaken to implement the model in these

[1] Throughout this remainder of this report, **SEDL** is used to designate the partnership of organizations that are actively involved in this work.

sites, from their respective starting points through December 2002, and factors that have influenced the development and refinement of the model. This first review of the implementation progress provides SEDL with important insights needed to strengthen the model and increase its likelihood of success. Subsequent reports will address the three research questions above; it is too early in the process to determine whether districts and schools are increasing their capacity to work systemically or whether student achievement has increased.

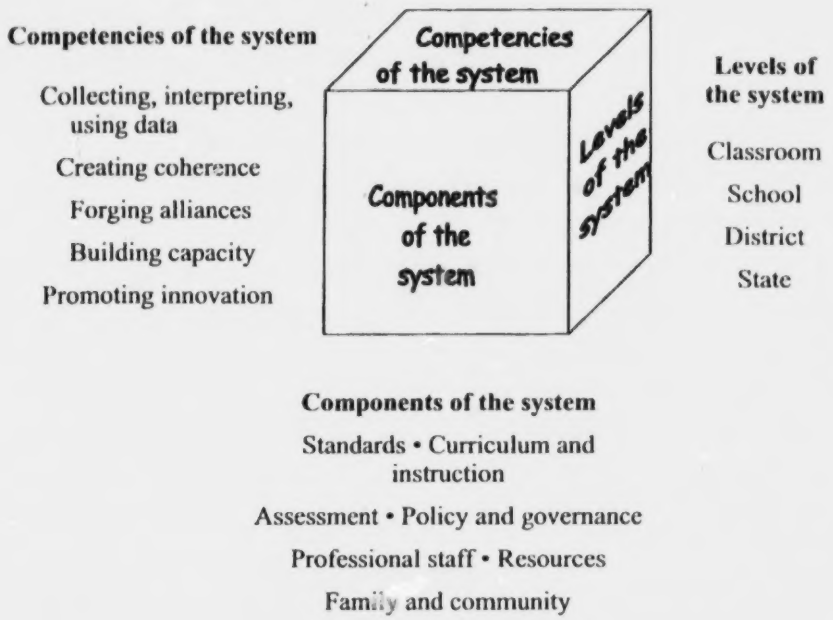
In addition to this first introductory section, the remaining sections of this report provide: 2) a brief review of SEDL's *Working Systemically* model, 3) the procedures and analyses used to document activities in each site, 4) a description of where the sites were at the start of this effort, 5) the progression of the work in these sites through December 2002, 6) key issues that emerged as the development and refinement of the model progressed, and 7) a summary and next steps. Appendices A and B contain the instrumentation SEDL used to gather the data for this report, Appendix C includes narrative profiles of individual sites, and Appendix D provides additional data summary tables.

## 2. SEDL's *Working Systemically* Model

SEDL designed its *Working Systemically* model to assist low-performing districts and schools in improving student performance in reading and mathematics. It is based on a rational planning process used in numerous school improvement programs (Blum & Landas, 1998; Edmonds, 1979; Lezotte & Jacoby, 1992) that relies on the identification of problems and the development, implementation, and monitoring of a plan to address these problems. SEDL's model, however, has three distinct features. First, multiple levels of the educational system (e.g., district, school) must be involved in the improvement effort. Work that occurs at only one level of the system has little chance of survival over the long haul (Sashkin & Egermeier, 1993). Second, it specifically addresses student achievement. Past school improvement efforts have often spent valuable time on concerns (e.g., school environment, discipline, parent involvement) that do not directly improve student achievement (American Federation of Teachers, 1999). With the press for improvement in student achievement so central in most state accountability systems, it is important to direct districts' and schools' attention squarely on student achievement (Elmore, Abelmann, & Furman, 1996; Odden, 1998). Third, the model provides a three-dimensional framework (see SEDL, 2000a, for an in-depth description of the *Working Systemically* model) and set of protocols that structure and direct the activities to be undertaken at the district and school(s).

Figure 1 illustrates SEDL's three-dimensional framework. The three dimensions represent the levels, components, and competencies that educators must address as part of their systemic work.

Figure 1. This cube illustrates the systemic interrelationships of SEDL's *Working Systemically* Model, including the levels, components, and competencies.




SEDL's model is used to operationally define what working systemically means; the definition has three parts. First, working systemically involves all levels of the system (i.e., state, district, school, and classroom) in improving student achievement. Second, all parts or components of the system must be considered in making improvements (i.e., standards, curriculum and instruction, assessment, policy and governance, professional staff, resources, and family and community). Third, five competencies must be mastered by those individuals involved in the improvement effort (i.e., collecting, interpreting, and using data; creating coherence; forging alliances; building capacity; and promoting innovation).

In SEDL's original proposal, the expectation was that site work would begin at the district and school levels simultaneously with a cross-section of representatives from the district and schools, including the superintendent, district office staff, principals,



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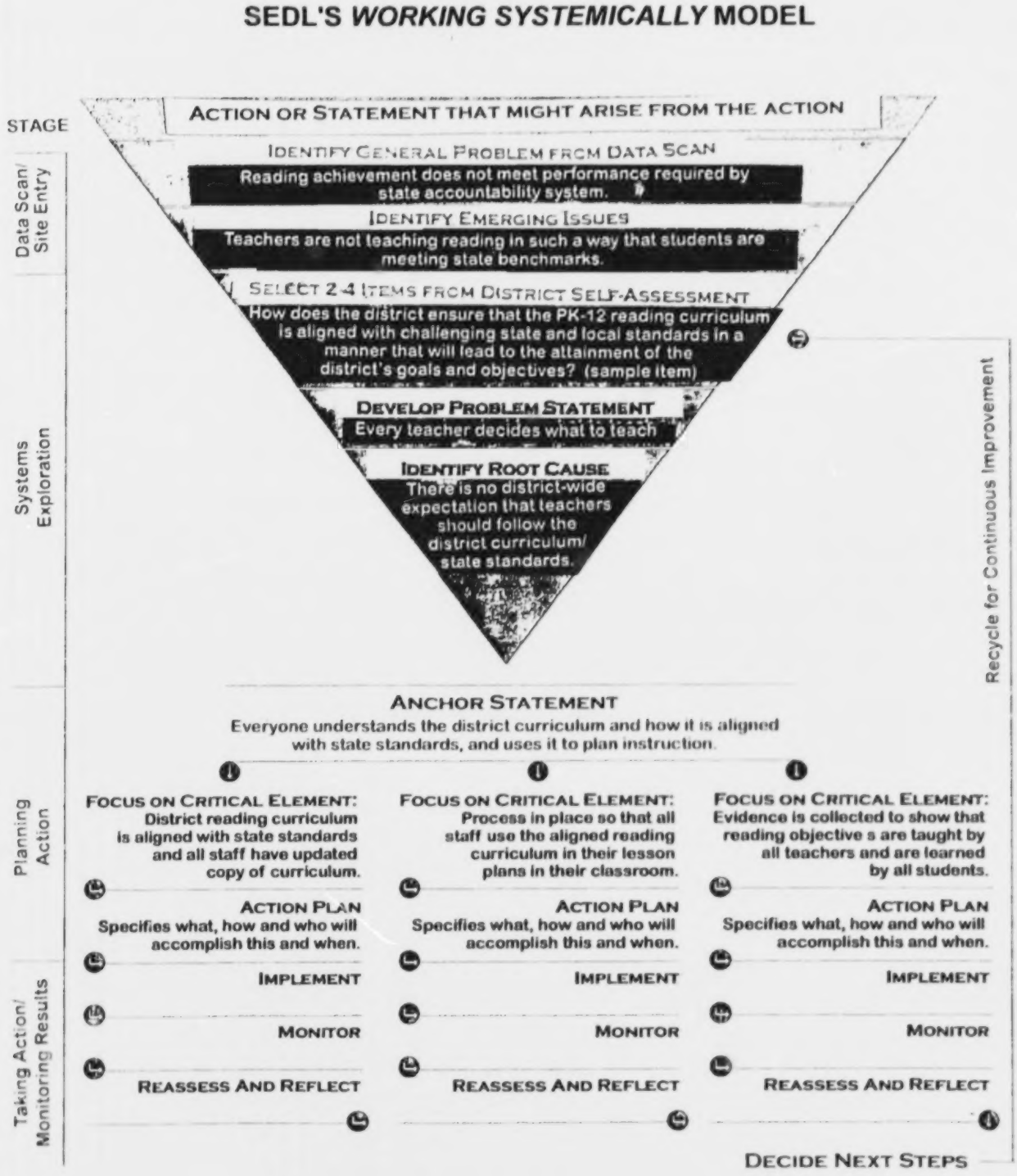
teachers, parents, and community representatives or business partners. These individuals become the district or school leadership team and proceed through the model's stages. However, SEDL has allowed districts and schools to form teams based on their comfort level to include or exclude representatives from one or more of these groups, with the expectation that these groups will eventually be represented as the teams progress in their work and realize the importance of diverse membership to develop and secure buy-in for proposed improvements.

Figure 2 provides an example of a hypothetical district that used SEDL's model to improve student achievement in reading. SEDL's model has five stages. As part of the Data Scan/Site Entry stage, under the direction of SEDL field staff, the district leadership team learned that reading achievement did not meet the expectations laid out in the state's accountability system (see "Identify general problem from Data Scan") and that teachers may not be teaching reading in such a way that students were able to meet state benchmarks (see "Identify emerging issues").

As the district leadership team moved into the Systems Exploration stage, two to four items were selected from the District Self-Assessment tool to help team members explore the emerging problem in more depth, often by collecting additional data on existing practices and their results. The team examined instruction and looked at how teachers decided what to teach (see "Develop problem statement"). After fully exploring existing practices and their results, the district leadership team concluded that the district failed to meet state benchmarks in reading because teachers were not expected to follow the state standards and district reading curriculum (see "Identify root cause"). To solve

Figure 2. SEDL's *Working Systemically* Model includes five stages.


SEDL'S WORKING SYSTEMICALLY MODEL
STAGE
Data Scan/ Site Entry
Systems Exploration
Planning Action
Taking Action/ Monitoring Results
ACTION OR STATEMENT THAT MIGHT ARISE FROM THE ACTION
IDENTIFY GENERAL PROBLEM FROM DATA SCAN
Reading achievement does not meet performance required by state accountability system.
IDENTIFY EMERGING ISSUES
Teachers are not teaching reading in such a way that students are meeting state benchmarks.
SELECT 2-4 ITEMS FROM DISTRICT SELF-ASSESSMENT
How does the district ensure that the PK-12 reading curriculum is aligned with challenging state and local standards in a manner that will lead to the attainment of the district's goals and objectives? (sample item)
DEVELOP PROBLEM STATEMENT
Every teacher decides what to teach
IDENTIFY ROOT CAUSE
There is no district-wide expectation that teachers should follow the district curriculum/ state standards.
Recycle for Continuous Improvement
ANCHOR STATEMENT
Everyone understands the district curriculum and how it is aligned with state standards, and uses it to plan instruction.
FOCUS ON CRITICAL ELEMENT: District reading curriculum is aligned with state standards and all staff have updated copy of curriculum.
FOCUS ON CRITICAL ELEMENT: Process in place so that all staff use the aligned reading curriculum in their lesson plans in their classroom.
FOCUS ON CRITICAL ELEMENT: Evidence is collected to show that reading objective s are taught by all teachers and are learned by all students.
ACTION PLAN
Specifies what, how and who will accomplish this and when.
IMPLEMENT
MONITOR
REASSESS AND REFLECT
DECIDE NEXT STEPS



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this problem, the district leadership team agreed that everyone has to understand the district curriculum and how it is aligned to the state standards, and use this curriculum to plan instruction (see "Anchor statement"). The first two stages of the model help narrow and deepen the district leadership team's focus of work.

As the district leadership team moved into the Planning Action stage, members focused on three critical elements that were necessary for the anchor statement to be realized: 1) the alignment of the district reading curriculum with state standards and the distribution of updated copies of the curriculum to all staff, 2) the development and implementation of a process to ensure that all staff use the aligned reading curriculum to create their lesson plans and teach them in their classrooms, and 3) the collection of evidence to determine whether reading objectives are taught by all teachers and learned by all students. The district leadership team developed plans to address each critical element at the district level.

In the Taking Action and Monitoring Results stage, the district leadership team implemented its plan, regularly checked to see that it was being implemented as planned, and made adjustments as necessary. After 1 year, the team decided that the existing plan was no longer appropriate as teachers were diligently following the district curriculum in their classrooms. However, reading scores were still not acceptable for all students.

The team repeated the process (i.e., Recycling for Continuous Improvement stage), starting at the Systems Exploration stage to identify other root causes that must be addressed for the district's reading achievement to meet state expectations. For example, the team found that teachers had insufficient intervention strategies available to them

when students did not master reading skills within an acceptable period of time. Similar activities occurred at each school.

SEDL is developing and refining its *Working Systemically* model for school reform. It is conducting this work in five states (i.e., Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas) with up to four districts in each state, including one or two schools in each district (SEDL, 2002). SEDL assigns a site coordinator along with a reading or mathematics specialist from its staff to each site. These field staff are responsible for working with district- and school-level staff in implementing the *Working Systemically* model in each site using the framework and protocols. SEDL field staff start their interactions with these teams in a "guide and model" mode to direct them in moving forward through the stages. Over time, each team gradually takes on more of the responsibility for planning and directing these activities themselves, and SEDL field staff step further into the background. Eventually, districts and schools are expected to understand and become proficient in implementing SEDL's model independently.

SEDL field staff document the implementation of the model using electronically maintained site contact records. This database of records is one source used to assess the development and refinement of the framework and protocols. In addition, each site is assigned a member of the research team who is responsible for analyzing site contact records and conducting biannual interviews. Further descriptions of the research team's activities are provided in the next section.

## 3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

In addition to developing and refining a *Working Systemically* model for school reform, SEDL is conducting a research study to assess the impact of its model on increasing participating districts' and schools' capacity to work systemically and, in turn, increasing student achievement in reading and mathematics (SEDL, 2000b). Three questions direct this research:

- To what extent are low-performing districts and schools increasing their capacity to work systemically?
- What strategies contribute to increasing the capacity of low-performing districts and schools to work systemically?
- Does student achievement increase as districts and schools increase their capacity to work systemically?

This report does not provide answers to these three research questions, as it is too early in the process to determine whether districts and schools are increasing their capacity to work systemically or whether student achievement has increased based on their involvement with the SEDL model. However, this report does describe the activities that have been undertaken in these sites to develop and refine the model, from their respective starting points through December 2002. Of particular interest is whether SEDL field staff and the educators with whom they are working are implementing SEDL's model with fidelity, and what issues or factors have emerged that may need to be addressed for the model to be successful. The data presented in this report will be used by SEDL field staff to refine and further test the model.

**Data Collection Methods**

Data collection in these sites is ongoing. This report includes data collected from each site's starting point through December 2002. It is based on descriptive information

collected about each site, site contact records, and two rounds of interviews. A brief description of each data source follows. Annual student achievement and survey data are not used in analyses for this report.[2] The research team determined that these indicators would be of limited utility for this report given each site's length of engagement with SEDL.

*Site Descriptive Information*

To gain a better understanding of each site's context, the SEDL research team collected descriptive information about each site when activities first commenced. This included information on the size and geographic location of the district, district and school student enrollments, number of teachers, per-pupil expenditures, racial/ethnic composition of student body, and percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. The research team gathered these data from state education agency databases and district records and complemented them with data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Educational Statistics Common Core of Data.

*Site Contact Records*

After each visit or contact, SEDL field staff complete a site contact record that is maintained in an electronic database.[3] The site contact record includes prompts to structure the information collected about a particular contact, including narratives of the plan for the particular contact, activities that occurred during the contact, and the next steps for moving forward as well as the SEDL field staff member's reflections about that

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[2] Student test scores on state-mandated achievement tests each year are gathered to measure student outcomes. The working systemically survey is administered to district and school administrators and teachers in the spring of each school year. It was administered in May 2002 and May 2003.

[3] The Site Contact Record format has been modified over time to provide additional prompts to structure SEDL field staff notes.

contact. Each record also lists the location, duration, and other key pieces of information to enable tracking of site contacts and activities over time. The SEDL research team trained the field staff members on how to complete site contact records. SEDL field staff enter their information and store it in Filemaker Pro for easy retrieval and regular review. A copy of the site contact record template is included in Appendix A.

*Interviews*

Members of SEDL's research team conducted semi-structured interviews at each site in the spring and late fall of 2002 with a sample of district and school leadership team representatives (including the superintendent, principal(s), one or two teachers, and other relevant members of district or school teams).[4] (See Appendix B for copies of the two interview protocols.) The research team completed six to nine interviews per site during each round of visits. The team recorded responses to each question during the interview; when necessary, back-up audiotapes clarified and expanded on these notes.

**Data Analysis Methods**

The SEDL research team analyzed site contact record and interview data on two levels: thematically (within-case) and across sites (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990; SEDL, 2000b; Wolcott, 1994). The goal of this strategy was to combine the data sources described previously and to look at the sites and their progress in terms of their fidelity to the *Working Systemically* model.

Research team members created data display tables based on the themes of: 1) general context of the site and 2) implementation of the *Working Systemically* model. A third theme captured additional issues that emerged as implementation progressed. Each

[4] In five sites, the fall interview questions were included in another interview protocol developed and used by SEDL's Evaluation Services.

Figure 3. The SEDL research team used the following questions to guide the analysis and comparison of site data.

1. What was the status of sites when work first began?
   - When was the site recruited? (Table 1)
   - What were the grade levels of participating schools? (Table 2)
   - What was the status of alignment between the state standards and the district curriculum? (Table 3)
   - How adequate are district resources for instruction? (Table 4)
   - What are district and teacher expectations of student performance? (Table 5)

2. What is the current status of work with SEDL's involvement? What elements of the *Working Systemically* model are in place or in process?
   - Where is the site in terms of the stages of the model? (Table 6)
   - What is the pace of work at the site? (Table 7)
   - What levels of the system are being engaged in the work and are they interconnected? (Table 8)
   - What components of the model are being addressed by the site? (Table 9)
   - What competencies of the model are being addressed by the site? (Table 10)
   - Did the site focus on reading or math at the very beginning? Did the site have another or undetermined focus? (Table 11)
   - Does the site have an action plan in place? Does the site have a clear reading or math focus? What is the relationship of plans to focus? (Table 12)
   - What is the composition of district or school teams? How do they relate, with reciprocal membership or other representation? (Table 13)
   - How do teams work together? Are they collaborative? Can they work on their own? Do they need help from SEDL to work as a team? (Table 14)

3. What other factors have emerged as key issues?
   - Do leaders focus on instruction or operations? (Table 15)
   - What are leaders' response styles (from proactive to reactive)? (Table 16)
   - Do leaders follow through and attend to improvement work? (Table 17)
   - What expectations are held for students and how do they influence the system's response to them? (Table 18)

theme included a set of more specific questions to provide further detail and description on each site. Figure 3 summarizes these themes; specific questions for the third theme were developed as particular issues arose. Individual research team members completed data displays for their respective sites using the site descriptive data, site contact records, and interviews. The entire research team reviewed all of the sites' display tables to ensure that all members were using the same categorization and coding rubrics in completing these displays. They then created aggregate data tables to summarize the data display tables across the sample of 16 districts and 29 schools.

The SEDL research team prepared narrative profiles for each site that described: 1) the general context, 2) the implementation of the SEDL model, and 3) accomplishments and challenges. Site coordinators reviewed narrative site profiles for accuracy. The research team made necessary corrections and removed identifying information from each site description to protect the anonymity of the sites. These profiles appear in Appendix C of this report.

**Strengths and Limitations of Approach**

This data collection and analysis approach has several strengths. Site contact records document all contacts with districts and schools and provide the SEDL research team with a rich history of how each site has implemented the model.[5] The two rounds of interviews provided additional perspectives from the administrators and faculty in these districts and schools. Analyses of site contact records and interviews thus permitted triangulation of emergent findings.

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[5] SEDL field staff varied considerably in their competency in completing site contact records with sufficient detail for current analysis purposes. Additional training and one-on-one coaching has helped improve the level of detail of these records over time.

This approach also has limitations. Site contact records and interview data are subjective in nature and may not always convey accurate representations of what is occurring in the sites. In addition, it is difficult to make firm statements about the associations among different variables as each site is at a different stage in the model, is confronted with numerous unique events and characteristics, and is a "work in progress" or subject to ongoing change. Despite these limitations, these analyses reveal some indicators of what is successful and what is not in SEDL's *Working Systemically* model.

## 4. Initial Status of Sites

The first year research report (SEDL, 2002)[6] described the procedures used to identify and recruit four sites in each of five states in SEDL's Regional Educational Laboratory region (i.e., Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas) and demographic characteristics of the sites; this information will not be repeated here. (Narrative profiles in Appendix C describe each site if the reader wishes to learn more about a particular site.)

This section of the report provides information about the date that activities commenced at each of the sites and the grade-level clusters involved in each district. It also presents self-report data about the status of alignment of the district curriculum with state standards, the resources available to support core instruction and student achievement, and the expectations held by district and school staff for student achievement. According to recent research (Elmore & Burney, 1998; Holdzkom, 2001; Schmoker, 2002), these three factors are likely to influence the success of reform efforts.

**Start Date of Work at Individual Sites**

SEDL began working with individual sites as they were recruited. Recruitment began in the spring of FY01 and continued into the fall of that same year. Two additional sites were recruited in FY02 as a few districts discontinued their participation in this R&D effort in this report.[7] Table 1 displays the start date for each district included in this report.

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[6] This report is available online at http://www.sedl.org/rel/intensivesites.pdf.

[7] Three districts were recruited in FY01 but discontinued their participation early because of superintendent turnover, lack of commitment to the joint work, and limited match between SEDL's model and the district's philosophy. They are not included in these

Table 1
Start Date of Work at District Sites

| FY01 2nd qtr | FY01 3rd qtr | FY01 4th qtr | FY02 1st qtr | FY02 3rd qtr |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Desert Hills<br>Piedmont<br>Southwest City | Bricktown<br>Cottonwood<br>Farmville<br>Highway Junction<br>Mesa<br>Washington City<br>Wrightsville | Delta Village<br>Forked River<br>High Meadows<br>River City | Athens | Bayou City |

SEDL recruited 14 of the 16 districts in FY01 and the remaining two sites in FY02. All but two of the districts have been engaged with SEDL for a minimum of 1 year at the time that data collection ended for this report. A few districts worked with SEDL for several additional months, though the reader should note that activities in districts and schools generally did not continue over the summer months in either year.

**Participating Schools**

SEDL proposed working with one or two schools along with each district. District leaders selected the particular schools with some input from SEDL. They did not restrict their selection to any particular grade-level cluster (i.e., elementary, middle, or secondary), although SEDL encouraged district leaders to consider feeder patterns in selecting particular schools when multiple school levels were involved to maximize the desired results. Table 2 summarizes the various combinations that resulted.

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analyses. These issues are briefly discussed in section five of this report. In subsequent reports, SEDL will analyze these issues more fully to describe and understand the factors that led to the discontinuation of sites from the R&D effort.

Table 2
Grade Levels of Participating Schools in Districts

| Grade-level combination | Sites |
|---|---|
| **Single school** | Cottonwood (HS), Southwest City[a], Wrightsville (Elem) |
| **Two elementary schools** | Highway Junction, River City |
| **Elementary and middle school** | Desert Hills |
| **Elementary and high school** | Delta Village, Forked River, High Meadows, Piedmont, Washington City |
| **Middle and high school** | Athens, Bayou City, Bricktown, Farmville, Mesa |

[a] This district closed one of its two elementary schools after working with SEDL for only a short period of time. Data for only one school are reported.

Of the 16 districts included in this report, three districts have only one participating school (two have only elementary schools and one a high school); the remaining 13 all have two schools. Twelve of the 29 buildings are elementary schools, six are middle schools, and 11 are high schools. In four of the smallest districts (i.e., Delta Village, Forked River, High Meadows, and Southwest City), all grade levels and buildings are involved in this effort.

**Alignment of District Curriculum to Standards**

Recent school improvement research (Johnson, Asera, & Raglund, 1999; National Center for Educational Accountability, 2002; Schmoker, 2001) has indicated that the alignment of curriculum to standards is one key area in which improving districts and/or schools should focus their attention to make gains in student achievement. SEDL asked district and school personnel about the alignment of their district's curriculum with state standards during the spring and fall interviews. Research team members aggregated individual responses to determine a single answer for each district and compiled them in Table 3.

Table 3
Alignment of District Curricula with State Standards at Site Entry/Data Scan Stage

| **Alignment completed** | **Alignment underway** | **No efforts underway** |
|---|---|---|
| Athens<br>Bayou City<br>Bricktown<br>Forked River<br>High Meadows<br>Highway Junction<br>Mesa<br>Wrightsville | Cottonwood<br>Desert Hills<br>Farmville<br>Piedmont<br>Washington City | Delta Village<br>River City<br>Southwest City |

Eight of the 16 districts indicated that their curricula are aligned to state standards. The following quotations from interviews summarize the status of many of these districts and schools:

> We wrote our curriculum when the state issued the content standards, and I worked on the team. Each district was responsible for writing curriculum to match the standards. (Athens)

> We are trying to make sure that our instruction activities are predicated on the standards that the state has set. We are working and teaching toward the goal of alignment. The curriculum is not aligned as yet to our satisfaction. We don't have students at all schools addressing the same skills that others are. We are developing activities for teachers to use to address that. We are working with teachers so that they have the skills they need to do this.We are still working on putting this all together. (Highway Junction)

> Each teacher was given the state standards and the local standards [guides] for all the areas. I think I have got them on my shelves. [We] use the benchmarks. Some take it more seriously than others. (River City)

Five others indicated that they had some alignment effort underway when SEDL began working with them. Three reported that they were unsure about the status of the

alignment of their curricula with state standards and that they had no alignment activities underway.

**Adequacy and Use of Resources**

During the spring and fall interviews, district and school personnel described whether available resources were adequate to meet district and school core instructional needs. SEDL research team members coded individual responses as adequate or inadequate to meet these needs and aggregated them across the district. Table 4 summarizes these data.

Table 4
Adequacy of District Resources to Support Core Instruction

| **Adequate district resources to support core instruction** | **Inadequate district resources to support core instruction** |
|---|---|
| Athens | Highway Junction |
| Bayou City | Southwest City |
| Bricktown | |
| Cottonwood | |
| Delta Village | |
| Desert Hills | |
| Farmville | |
| Forked River | |
| High Meadows | |
| Mesa | |
| Piedmont | |
| River City | |
| Washington City | |
| Wrightsville | |

Interview data revealed that 14 of the 16 districts reported that resources were adequate to support their core instructional needs while two did not. In the former sites, administrators and teachers alike reported that Title I dollars available to their schools helped tremendously in providing the necessary instructional resources that other schools might not have.

> We have plenty, we are a Title I school. We spend a lot of money to reduce class size. We usually have some extra to buy computers, and the central office has been helpful. We have a nice library, we have got Accelerated Reader…As far as instructional resources, we have everything we need. (Athens)

In spite of administrators' and teachers' responses that instructional resources were adequate, they acknowledged that teachers often use their personal funds to purchase additional materials and supplies to supplement and complement what is available from the district.

> The budget is not great. As far as I know, everyone has what they feel is necessary. On the other hand, most teachers said that they buy extras for their classrooms from their own pocket. I usually buy things myself if I need something. (High Meadows)

In the two districts where resources were inadequate, teachers did not receive sufficient materials to support the instructional program.

> This year we've not even gotten the $10 per child that we have gotten before. The district said they have not gotten money from the state and have not had any money at all to provide for children. This is an economically deprived area; families cannot provide extras. Things are already running out and we have no money from the district to buy anything. (Highway Junction)

**Expectations for Students**

During the fall interviews, SEDL research team members asked both administrators and teachers whether high expectations are held for all students. Their responses fell into three themes: 1) high expectations are held for all students, 2) high expectations are held for some students, and 3) high expectations are held for few students. The research team members created a three-point rubric which they applied to

code individual responses and aggregate across a site to determine an overall district rating. Table 5 summarizes these data.

Table 5
Expectations for Students

| **High expectations held for some students** | **High expectations held for few students** |
|---|---|
| Athens | Cottonwood |
| Bayou City | Delta Village |
| Bricktown | Farmville |
| Desert Hills | Mesa |
| Forked River | |
| High Meadows | |
| Highway Junction | |
| Piedmont | |
| River City | |
| Southwest City | |
| Washington City | |
| Wrightsville | |

Most administrators and teachers in low-performing districts or schools initially responded that they held high expectations for students. However, as the research team probed to determine whether these expectations were held for all students, the team saw more variability in responses. At 12 of the sites, administrators and teachers stated that they held high expectations for some but not all of their students. Expectations varied depending on the individual student and his/her family circumstances, such as socioeconomic or immigrant status.

> The issue holding students back from achievement seems to be the core knowledge that they come with. We do something at school and then they go home and are back in the same situation. If the parents don't read or if they are both working…they don't get support or direction. (Highway Junction)

> But we have an awful lot of kids…[that] have no home life. They have no experiences;…a lot of them don't see any

> point in doing anything because, you know, mom and dad didn't do anything, grandpa and grandma don't do anything, so why should they do anything?...just like mom and dad, we'll get on welfare, or whatever. There's no real goal for them, they don't really see the necessity or importance of it. Now that's not true for all of them, but it is for a good majority. (Wrightville)

Administrators and teachers at four sites acknowledged that they had high expectations for a few of their students. In these latter four sites, educators believe that students have few opportunities to escape the poverty of their communities and thus do not hold high expectations for them.

> Why make it harder on them? Their life is hard enough already. (Cottonwood)

> One thing you have to understand is when white people come to [Delta Village] and they see all these black kids and the majority black staff, the first thing they think is that this is not as important as when I go to...some of those other Northern schools where it's predominantly white, and in some instances all white. The expectation here is not as great as it could be. (Delta Village)

This line of thinking puts students at a disadvantage that is not of their own making.

**Summary**

The majority of the 16 districts and 29 schools had worked with SEDL for approximately 1 year when data collection ended for this report. The sample of schools includes elementary, middle, and high schools. District and school self-reports indicated that about half had completed aligning their district curriculum with state standards and three fourths had adequate resources to support their core instructional programs, often because of the availability of Title I funds. High expectations were not held for all students in these sites.

## 5. Description of the Work

This section of the report describes the activities that have taken place in the 16 sites from their respective starting points (see Table 1) to December 2002, and extent to which SEDL's *Working Systemically* model is being implemented. SEDL's model must be implemented with fidelity to accurately determine whether the overall model or particular elements work and under what conditions.

As noted in the second section of this report, SEDL's *Working Systemically* model expects districts and schools to improve student performance in reading or mathematics. With SEDL's assistance, district and school administrators and faculty form leadership teams and progress through five stages: 1) Site Entry/Data Scan, 2) Systems Exploration, 3) Planning Action, 4) Taking Action and Monitoring Results, and 5) Recycling the Process. To make improvements either in reading or mathematics, SEDL field staff work with district and school leadership teams to address multiple components (i.e., standards, curriculum and instruction, assessment, policy and governance, professional staff, resources, and family and community involvement) and multiple competencies (i.e., collecting, interpreting, and using data; creating coherence; forging alliances; building capacity; and promoting innovation). The components and competencies form two dimensions of SEDL's model and represent the "content" and "skills" of the activities district and/or school teams undertake with SEDL's assistance. SEDL's model specifies overlap in membership of district and school teams (i.e., levels of the system) to reinforce the systemic nature of the effort.

This section of the report describes the stages of work completed at the sites and the pace at which they have worked, the parts of the framework they have addressed, the

focus of the district leadership team on improving student reading or mathematics achievement, and the functioning of the leadership teams at the district and school levels.

**Stage of Work**

SEDL's *Working Systemically* model has five stages that organize and structure the activities of districts and schools (see Figure 2, page for details). Research team members examined site contact records to determine the stage of work at each site as of December 2002. SEDL field staff record the stage of work as part of the descriptive information for each site contact record (see Appendix A). In some cases, the district and school teams were not at the same stage of work. In those cases, the SEDL research team members recorded the district's stage because SEDL's model stipulates that the district's activities should guide the efforts of individual schools. Table 6 summarizes these data by the quarter in which the site began work with SEDL.

Table 6
Status of Work at Sites

| Stage of work/Start date[a] | FY01 2nd qtr | FY01 3rd qtr | FY01 4th qtr | FY02 2nd qtr | FY02 3rd qtr |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Site entry/ data scan | | | | | |
| Systems exploration | | Cottonwood<br>Washington City | | Athens | Bayou City |
| Planning action | Desert Hills | Farmville<br>Mesa | River City | | |
| Taking action | Piedmont<br>Southwest City | Bricktown<br>Highway Junction<br>Wrightsville | Delta Village<br>Forked River<br>High Meadows | | |
| Recycling the progress | | | | | |

[a] No sites began work with SEDL in the first and fourth quarters of FY02.

SEDL continues to work with 14 of the 17 sites recruited in FY01.[8] Eight of these 14 sites have moved to the Taking Action stage. Two sites (i.e., Cottonwood, Washington City) have not moved past the Systems Exploration stage; reviews of the site contact records for these sites suggest that their progress has been hampered by internal leadership changes and/or struggles at the district and school levels that have detracted attention from this effort. The remaining FY01 four sites (i.e., Desert Hills, Farmville, Mesa, and River City) did not finalize their actions plans before the end of the fiscal year and so are in the Planning Action stage. Reviews of the site contact records in three of these four sites (i.e., Desert Hills, Farmville, and River City) indicated that the activities and discussions in their team meetings have not consistently focused on improving student achievement. In the fourth site (i.e., Mesa), members of the district leadership team have attended team meetings irregularly; this, in turn, has made it difficult for the team (which varies in composition from meeting to meeting) to reach consensus on how its work should proceed. Two sites were recruited in FY02; both are at the Systems Exploration stage.

In looking at the data displayed in Table 6, it is clear that sites progressed through the model's stages at different rates. SEDL's original plan called for monthly meetings of the district and school leadership teams; the plan did not establish an amount of time for each stage. SEDL research team members analyzed site contact records to determine the pace at which teams worked (i.e., the frequency of meetings and stages of work completed), and saw three patterns emerge: 1) teams that generally meet every month and

[8] Three sites decided to discontinue working with SEDL for different reasons (e.g., lack of commitment, match between SEDL's *Working Systemically* model and the district's operational mode, and superintendent turnover).

participate in activities that move forward (steady pace), 2) teams that generally meet every month but activities and discussions spill over from one meeting to the next (slow pace), and 3) teams that do not meet regularly and make uneven progress (inconsistent pace). The SEDL research team created and used a three-point rubric based on these three patterns to categorize each site. Table 7 summarizes these data.

Table 7
Pace of Work

| Stage | Steady pace | Slow pace | Inconsistent pace |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Site Entry/Data Scan** | | | |
| **Systems Exploration** | Bayou City[a] | Athens[a]<br>Cottonwood | Washington City |
| **Planning Action** | | Desert Hills<br>Mesa<br>River City | Farmville |
| **Taking Action** | Bricktown<br>Delta Village<br>Forked River<br>High Meadows<br>Highway Junction<br>Piedmont | | Southwest City<br>Wrightsville |
| **Recycling the Process** | | | |

[a] Districts began work with SEDL in FY02.

The pace is steady in seven of the sites, slow in another five sites, and inconsistent in the remaining four sites. In general, those sites that maintained a steady pace have made more progress through the stages; six of the eight (i.e., Bricktown, Delta Village, Forked River, High Meadows, Highway Junction, Piedmont) are in the Taking Action stage. Three of the four sites (i.e., Cottonwood, Desert Hills, and River City) in which the pace has been slow are in the Planning Action stage, behind others that started at the same time as they did. The pace in the other four sites has been inconsistent; a review of

site contact records revealed that activities stalled in three of these sites when changes occurred in the leadership at the district and school levels (i.e., Farmville, Southwest City, and Wrightsville), while other district issues took precedence in the fourth site (i.e., Washington City).

Site contact records and interview responses in the spring and fall revealed some frustration with the pace of work in some sites. Some participants reported that too much time was spent "talking" and they were anxious for a clear direction and the pace to accelerate.

> I think a few teachers might be a bit more frustrated than before. I think some of the teachers are still confused about their role, and I think they are expecting a clearer mandate from somebody. They still have questions, and they want immediate answers. The teachers seem pleased with the idea that this is a long-term, ongoing process, but that doesn't mean that they don't also want to be told what they should do right now to improve reading scores. (Athens)

> [SEDL] helps you to brainstorm and identify the problem areas in your organization. They dig things out of you. They don't come in with any magic wands and try to solve problems and say you need to do this, you need to do that. …You decide what needs to be changed….Which was very frustrating for the first several meetings. It was hard to sit there. It was pretty slow going. (High Meadows)

These comments suggest that many educators do not understand that such "talking" is legitimate labor, that they need to fully comprehend what their current situation is, that they should build consensus (or create coherence) on what their problems are, and that they should closely scrutinize the causes of these problems. These comments may also suggest that most districts and schools do not regularly spend time together discussing and sorting out problems, much less planning how to solve them.

**SEDL's *Working Systemically* Model**

SEDL field staff use site contact records to document the activities that occur at each district and school involved in this effort. The site contact records include checklists to indicate which level(s), component(s), and competency(ies) are being addressed as well as narrative descriptions of the activities themselves. The two rounds of interviews also gathered relevant data about the activities at each site. SEDL research team members analyzed all of these to determine which level(s), component(s), and competency(ies) of the *Working Systemically* model district and school leadership teams have addressed.

*Levels of the System*

SEDL's model has four levels—state, district, school, and classroom. SEDL field staff encourage district and school leadership teams to coordinate activities across levels to maximize the desired outcomes. Table 8 summarizes these data.

Table 8
Levels of the System

| **Working at multiple levels, interconnected** | **Working at multiple levels, not interconnected** | **Working only at a single level** |
|---|---|---|
| Bayou City<br>Bricktown<br>Delta Village<br>Forked River | Athens<br>Desert Hills<br>Farmville<br>High Meadows<br>Highway Junction<br>Piedmont<br>River City<br>Southwest City | Cottonwood<br>Mesa<br>Washington City<br>Wrightsville |

Four of the sites are working at multiple levels, and their efforts are connected. Two of the four sites (i.e., Delta Village, Forked River) are fairly small in size. These smaller sites may have achieved a unified focus more easily than larger sites because of the differences in the number of schools and educators potentially involved. However,

size does not always play a determining factor. At one of the largest districts in SEDL's sample (i.e., Bricktown), the two school leadership teams see their purpose as implementing the district goal in their respective buildings; this is systemic work at its best. This connectivity between levels of the system is illustrated in a site contact record entry:

> We met with about 10 teachers and the principal. We reviewed the district goal—Everyone in the district is responsible for teaching reading strategies—and discussed how this goal fit into their campus plan…After unpacking the district goal, the teachers came up with a different [but related] goal for reading for their campus: Each student will raise his/her reading skills. We then discussed at each level of the system what they could be doing. (Bricktown)

Half of the sites have activities proceeding at both the district and school levels; however, these activities are often on parallel but only loosely connected tracks. As one central office staff member noted:

> I've been beating myself over it. Instead of just communicating to the principal all year in our district meetings, I should have been working with the teachers [at the school] as well. I thought the principal was communicating with the teachers, and I just found out that the teachers said they hadn't heard [anything], but we've been working on it since last October. That's what I would do different. (Wrightsville)

In the four remaining sites, meaningful teamwork related to SEDL's model was being completed at only one level.

*Components of the System*

SEDL's *Working Systemically* model has seven components: 1) standards, 2) curriculum and instruction, 3) assessment, 4) professional staff, 5) policy and governance, 6) resources, and 7) family and community. These represent the content

areas of the activities undertaken by the sites. SEDL research team members analyzed site contact records and interview responses to determine which components have been addressed by district and school leadership teams with field staff assistance. A site met the criteria for addressing a particular component if either the district or school leadership team was involved in relevant activities. Research team members also reviewed site contact records to determine the level of engagement of the district and school leadership teams in these activities. Five patterns emerged, ranging from no discussion of this component to the team's leading activities with SEDL's support. Research team members used these five patterns to develop a five-point rubric, which helped them categorize the level of engagement of the district and school leadership teams in activities related to a certain component. Table 9 presents these data.

Table 9
*Working Systemically* Components Addressed by Sites[a]

| Component | Not addressed | Included in discussions but no specific work undertaken | Specifically addressed; SEDL is leading any work undertaken | Specifically addressed; SEDL and site are playing active roles in work undertaken | Specifically addressed; site is leading work and SEDL is playing supportive role |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Standards** | 7 | 3 | 5 | 1 | 0 |
| **Curriculum and instruction** | 1 | 3 | 9 | 3 | 0 |
| **Assessment** | 3 | 2 | 9 | 2 | 0 |
| **Policy and governance** | 15 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| **Professional staff** | 4 | 3 | 6 | 2 | 1 |
| **Resources** | 15 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| **Family and community** | 12 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 |

*Note.* Particular components on which each district worked are reported in Appendix D.
[a]N=16.

As indicated in Table 9, the 16 sites have primarily addressed three components—curriculum and instruction, assessment, and professional staff. This concentration is not surprising given that these three components are the "bread and butter" of most districts and schools. Substantive effort in these three components is traditionally viewed as the most likely to produce gains (NCEA, 2002; Schmoker, 2002) and provide a more concrete place to start systems work.

When district and school leadership teams addressed the curriculum and instruction component, their activities generally focused on clearly specifying what classroom instruction should include, and aligning curriculum and instruction across classrooms at a single grade level as well as vertically across grades.

> After lunch, SEDL assisted the grade-level groups while they worked on mapping what they want students to know when they enter their grade level and what they want students to know when they leave that grade. This was the intended purpose for the site visit. This activity was very good for some of the groups. The Pre-K-3 team worked well together. After those teachers had completed their cards and brainstormed what they teach in their respective grade levels, I had them go back, and we color-coded their responses by beginning with the preschool and then kindergarten, first, and on through third, where they were teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. (Delta Village)

> Using the SEDL reading framework, we engaged the participants in a discovery process to uncover new understandings about the elements of a successful reading program. (Southwest City)

District and/or school representatives frequently acknowledged that they have not devoted much attention to ensuring that the "written" curriculum specified in state

standards and district curriculum guides was actually the "taught" curriculum in the classroom.

> Because they have completed aligning their math curriculum K-8, I want to use every opportunity to relate how we can move forward with this process. We briefly dialogued about…How do we know that they are teaching the math curriculum? Who is responsible for monitoring teachers and staff? Has the administration been familiarized with the new math curriculum? Do they know what to look for? Have the staff and teachers assessed the math curriculum? What process is in place? (Bayou City)

> The only problem that I see is that we have this written curriculum now that is aligned, but we still have some teachers going to their classroom and doing what they have always done. The actual taught curriculum doesn't match up with what we said we were going to do. (Wrightsville)

SEDL field staff have also helped teachers learn and implement instructional strategies that improve student learning in reading or mathematics.

> The [SEDL reading specialist] led a discussion on Effective Literacy Interventions, referring to highlighted key ideas in the reference materials we had distributed. She also reviewed and highlighted key ideas in the booklet *Put Reading First* as an introduction to the long-term work she would be doing with teachers over the next year. In order to clarify one key concept, the SEDL reading specialist demonstrated the use of QAR (Question, Answer, Relationship), a strategy which could be immediately used by all teachers on all grade levels. After lunch, she demonstrated reading comprehension techniques using the book *Testing Miss Malarkey*. (High Meadows)

The assessment activities of district and school leadership teams most often involve disaggregating student test scores to determine which subgroups of students are meeting which state benchmarks. In spite of the attention given by state departments of education and others to the importance of disaggregating student achievement data, most of the 16 sites have not analyzed in-depth their student scores on state-mandated tests prior to

starting work with SEDL. SEDL has spent substantial time helping district- and school-level staff members complete these analyses and demonstrating how to do this.

Other assessment activities have evolved as district- or school-level staff members recognize that existing testing programs do not provide sufficient data to allow for the necessary diagnosis of students' strengths and weaknesses or the tracking of student progress (i.e., Bricktown, Forked River). In these districts, faculties have begun collaborating with SEDL to develop their own local assessments to more carefully diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses and track student progress.

> The reading test. In this case, we had some from lower elementary, upper elementary, high school, including the administrator. We problem solved. We decided what would be the most important things to work on, what we wanted to know. As a group, we saw it, we figured it out. (Forked River)

The professional staff component of the model includes recruiting and retaining high-quality staff, professional development, and appraisal. No attention has been given in district or school leadership teams to staff recruitment and retention or appraisal, though it is clearly an issue in some sites. All 12 sites that have addressed this component focused on teacher professional development. In nine of these sites, the leadership teams have developed and provided professional development to strengthen teachers' instructional skills with assistance from SEDL. These professional development sessions usually take the form of teacher workshops or study groups, often using administrators or teachers from the school or district to lead professional development sessions.

> The purpose of this [study group] meeting was to begin helping teachers align their instruction to state standards, and to model the type of instruction that would promote student understanding of the standards. Another purpose was to build capacity for the district staff by modeling a

> professional development experience that promoted collaborative inquiry…This group is modeling an innovative approach to professional development for the River City teachers and staff. This exemplifies the principle of building a "culture of continuous inquiry." This session created an opportunity for cross-level support and communication. This is our vehicle for building capacity for a district/teacher support model and for creating coherence. (River City)

In a few cases (e.g., Highway Junction, Piedmont), the SEDL site coordinator has been able to link the district or school to technical assistance providers in their state who offer professional development at no charge or minimal costs.

> Two kindergarten teachers haven't been trained in the state's early literacy program. They are planning to begin the training after school for the next two months. The technical assistance provider [from the regional cooperative] will be coming to Piedmont and providing the training for them and others who want the training. (Piedmont)

Nine of the sites are addressing the standards component. These activities have centered on helping district- or school-level representatives understand state standards (e.g., Southwest City) and their connections to the district's curriculum. In almost all of the sites, the three other components—policy and governance, resources, or family and community involvement—received little attention. This may be expected since they do not directly influence student achievement.

As demonstrated in Table 9, SEDL has led most of the component activities in the sites. This is not surprising given the relatively short amount of time SEDL has been engaged with each site. As activities have progressed, SEDL has encouraged district- or school-level representatives in four sites (i.e., Bricktown, Forked River, Highway

Junction, and Piedmont) to take on more responsibility. In one case, district or school representatives took sole responsibility to plan and carry out activities or events.

*Competencies of the Framework*

The model includes five competencies: 1) collecting, interpreting, and using data, 2) creating coherence, 3) forging alliances, 4) building capacity, and 5) promoting innovation. These are the skill areas that district and school leadership teams must master with SEDL field staff assistance. SEDL research team members analyzed site contact records to determine which of the five competencies were being addressed. A site met the criteria for addressing a particular competency if either leadership team was involved in relevant skill-building activities. The research team developed a five-point rubric for determining the level of engagement of the district and school leadership team in activities related to this competency. This rubric parallels the rubric developed to determine the engagement of teams in the seven components; engagement could range from no engagement to leading the activities with support from SEDL. These data are summarized in Table 10.

Table 10
*Working Systemically* Competencies Addressed by Sites[a]

| Component | Not addressed | Included in discussions but no specific work undertaken | Specifically addressed; SEDL is leading any work undertaken | Specifically addressed; SEDL and site are playing active roles in work undertaken | Specifically addressed; site is leading the work and SEDL is playing supportive role |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Collecting, using, and interpreting data** | 2 | 0 | 10 | 4 | 0 |
| **Creating coherence** | 2 | 3 | 6 | 5 | 0 |
| **Forging alliances** | 2 | 1 | 11 | 2 | 0 |
| **Building capacity** | 0 | 0 | 12 | 3 | 1 |
| **Promoting innovation** | 15 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |

*Note*. Particular competencies on which each district worked are reported in Appendix D.
[a] N=16.

All of the sites are addressing capacity building, most often by providing professional development to teachers on instruction. Fourteen sites are addressing collecting, using, and interpreting data; most of these activities involved existing student achievement data.

> We had a district leadership team meeting in October where the central office staff and all school principals engaged in the study of data and how to interpret it and use it for instructional decision making. Then, the principals were directed to replicate this professional development session with their school staffs, which they did, with a central office staff member included in the sessions at the schools. (Desert Hills)

Two teams (i.e., Bricktown and Forked River) have developed with SEDL's help local assessments or procedures to supplement the state-mandated achievement tests and provide additional data on student progress.

Thirteen sites are addressing forging alliances, usually by forming teams of educators at the school or district level who typically have not partnered before.

> The SEDL program has brought us together, a group of us [elementary] together with a group in the high school. We're respecting each other. It's interesting, the high school has one status thing, the elementary has another. But we're working on the reading assessment together and that's a first. (Forked River)

> I have made changes in what I do based on collaboration. I have been hesitant to talk about what I do in my classroom in terms of making suggestions to others. But I have given suggestions. I find myself going and discussing things that I think work well. (Highway Junction)

These teams tackle curriculum alignment, instruction, and assessment; they often bring teachers and administrators together to plan alignment or professional development activities, learn new instructional strategies, and assist each other in their respective classrooms.

Eleven sites are addressing creating coherence; these activities most often focus on creating coherence in classroom curriculum and instruction among single-grade and multiple-grade groups of teachers (e.g., Highway Junction, Piedmont, River City).

> Today's [vertical alignment staff development workshop] was the first time I ever sat down with an elementary teacher to talk about math. So the communication there has not been very good but we need to fix that—that is something we're working on. (Piedmont)

One competency did not receive much attention in these sites—promoting innovation. This was unexpected given the stage in which most of the districts and schools are (i.e., Planning or Taking Action and Monitoring Results). In the Planning Action stage, district and school teams investigate different strategies to address specific problems, which is the essence of promoting innovation. This may suggest that districts

and schools were fairly conservative in what they included in plans (i.e., proposed strategies or practices that are already known), that they did not know how to investigate different options (and SEDL field staff did not provide direction or guidance), or that the action-planning process was circumvented in some other way.

As was the case with components, SEDL field staff led most of the competency-related activities in the 16 sites. Seven sites (i.e., Bayou City, Bricktown, Desert Hills, Forked River, Highway Junction, Piedmont, and Southwest City) are taking some responsibility for leading activities with SEDL on one or more competencies.

**Reading or Mathematics Focus**

As part of SEDL's model, each district leadership team focuses on improving student achievement in reading or mathematics. Districts initially identified reading or mathematics as their target area during the Data Scan/Site Entry stage; this area was reconfirmed by the results of the District Self-Assessment in the Systems Exploration stage. The research team members examined site contact records to determine if district leadership teams completed the Systems Exploration stage with a specified focus on reading or mathematics (as designated in the anchor statement). Table 11 presents these data.

Table 11
Reading or Mathematics Focus at End of Systems Exploration Stage

| **Explicit reading/ mathematics focus** | **Broad curriculum/other focus** | **System exploration stage not yet completed** |
|---|---|---|
| Bricktown | Highway Junction | Athens |
| Delta Village | Piedmont | Bayou City |
| Desert Hills | River City | Cottonwood |
| Farmville | Southwest City | Mesa |
| Forked River | Wrightsville | Washington City |
| High Meadows | | |

Six of the 11 districts that have completed the Systems Exploration stage have identified reading as their target area. The remaining five emerged from this stage with either a focus on curriculum broadly defined or on other issues of concern to this site; three of these five had originally indicated an interest in reading and two in mathematics. Five sites have not completed this stage of the model.

A key element of SEDL's model is creating an action plan to address the root cause of the problem and the critical elements identified as part of the District Self-Assessment during the Systems Exploration stage. SEDL research team members examined site contact records to determine if districts have developed plans that addressed the reading or mathematics problems identified as part of the District Self-Assessment during the Systems Exploration stage. Table 12 presents these data.

Table 12
Relationship between District Self-Assessment (DSA) and Action Plan

| **Action plan** | **DSA focus** | **No DSA focus on reading/math** | **DSA not completed** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Plan exists | Delta Village<br>Desert Hills<br>Farmville<br>Forked River<br>High Meadows<br>Southwest City | Highway Junction | |
| Plan does not exist | Bricktown | Piedmont<br>River City<br>Wrightsville | Athens<br>Bayou City<br>Cottonwood<br>Mesa<br>Washington City |

Districts that completed the District Self-Assessment with a specific curriculum concentration (on reading or mathematics) also moved forward and developed an action plan. Districts that did not complete the self-assessment as intended generally have not

moved forward on developing an action plan. Time does not appear to be a factor here; comparable periods of time have elapsed for both groups, those that have developed a plan and those that have not. A cursory review of these action plans revealed that most of them offer insufficient detail to prescribe action or measure results.

These data indicate that about half of the sites have maintained their emphasis on a single curriculum area when they finished the Systems Exploration stage. The other half have widened their span to include other curriculum areas or other issues altogether. These findings suggest that model design modifications are necessary to make sure that the endpoint for the District Self-Assessment is specifically tied to improving student achievement in either reading or mathematics, as well as to the purpose and scope of the action plan.

**Team Representation and Collaboration**

SEDL's model requires district- and school-level representatives to collaboratively identify and solve problems. In some sites, this may represent new ways of working together for administrators and teachers alike.

*Team Membership*

Research team members examined site contact records to determine whether school representatives served on district teams, and whether district representatives served on school teams. Logically, systemic work (i.e., work across multiple levels) most likely occurs if district and school leadership teams have some members in common.

Table 13
Representation of Schools and Districts on Teams

| **Reciprocal membership** | **School representatives on district team** | **District representatives on school team** |
|---|---|---|
| Bayou City | Desert Hills | Athens[a] |
| Bricktown | Piedmont | Cottonwood |
| Delta Village | River City | |
| Farmville | Southwest City | |
| Forked River | Washington City | |
| High Meadows | Wrightsville | |
| Highway Junction | | |
| Mesa | | |

[a] District representatives serve on only one of the two school teams.

Half of the sites have reciprocal membership on each team, that is, school representatives serve on the district team and district representatives serve on the school team. The reciprocal membership at one site (i.e., Bricktown) changed over time; a district representative was added to one of the school teams. Six of the district leadership teams have school representatives on them while two of the districts have school leadership teams with district representatives. In many of these sites, district staff members do not feel it necessary to participate in individual school teams:

> Because some [district] administrators are extremely defensive. And if you say something's wrong…they just want you to go away, and it's like, well, if something's wrong, then you *fix* it! (Mesa)

In other sites, district staff members are not always welcomed by school administrators or faculty as this site contact record revealed:

> One significant thing that occurred was that the district coordinator showed up at the [school] meeting to participate. Later, after the meeting, we asked…who had invited her to the meeting. [The school team member] said he had. He said that he was reluctant to do so at first, but with our encouragement to do so, and the reading teacher's encouragement to do so as well, he did. However, he did make a point of saying that we could now see why he

> hesitates to invite her to meetings, she has strong opinions and will express them so that the staff feels intimidated and will then defer to her opinion. (Bricktown)

*Team Collaboration*

SEDL's model requires individuals on both the district and school leadership teams to collectively solve problems and make decisions. Research team members examined site contact records to determine how district and school leadership team members worked together to solve problems or make decisions. They observed three interaction patterns: 1) teams that worked together well, both during and after meetings, regardless of whether SEDL was present; 2) teams that worked well together in team meetings, but were unable to sustain their work together when SEDL was not present; and 3) individuals that were struggling to work together as a team, regardless of whether SEDL was present. Research team members categorized the collaboration of teams at each site (i.e., district and school levels) using a three-point rubric (based on the three patterns of interaction) and assigned an overall rating to each site. Table 14 displays these ratings.

Table 14
Team Collaboration

| **Team members work well together** | **Members work well when SEDL present** | **Team members struggling to work together** |
|---|---|---|
| Bayou City<br>Bricktown<br>Delta Village<br>High Meadows<br>Highway Junction<br>Southwest City | Athens<br>Cottonwood<br>Desert Hills<br>Forked River<br>Mesa<br>Piedmont<br>River City<br>Washington City | Farmville<br>Wrightsville |

Teams in six sites work well together consistently. Teams in eight other sites work well when SEDL field staff are present, but generally do not continue on their own when SEDL is absent, perhaps an indication that the team does not fully understand or support the work. Two sites are "struggling" or having difficulty maintaining a team. Learning to work as a team is a dynamic process; it requires time and interaction to learn to work together well.

## 6. Key Issues That Have Emerged from This Work

The previous section described a test of its SEDL's model based on analyses of site contact records and two rounds of interviews. This section takes a broader look at these site contact records and interviews to identify issues that have emerged as SEDL develops and refines its model in 16 sites and 29 schools.

**Leadership Capacity at the District and School Levels**

Leadership is not an explicit element of SEDL's model. Research indicates that leadership is strongly associated with the outcomes of reform efforts (Day, 2000; Fullan and Miles, 1992; Pechman & King, 1993; and Tyack & Cuban, 1995). It also has emerged as an important factor in the progress of SEDL's efforts at the district and school levels.

Leadership changes have occurred in half of the districts and schools in the relatively short period that they have been engaged with SEDL. Two (i.e., Cottonwood and Wrightsville) have had changes at the superintendent level, three (i.e., Bayou City, Farmville, and Mesa) at the principal level, and two (i.e., Piedmont, Southwest City) at both the superintendent and principal level. At least one other (i.e., Washington City) saw changes in district-level staff who worked with SEDL on this effort. If reform efforts are to have enough time to take hold and flourish, leadership must have some stability (Fullan, 2000; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Hargreaves & Fink, 2000; Hord & Estes, 1998).

The stability of leadership is not the only concern, however. A consistent theme that emerged from the analyses of site contact records and both rounds of interviews centered on the limited skills of district and school leadership to prioritize instruction

over operations, to be proactive instead of reactive, and to follow through on improvement agendas. As a result, the research team decided to complete an additional set of data display tables related to leadership on three dimensions: 1) the focus of leadership at the district and school levels on instruction versus operations, 2) the style of action of leadership in terms of operating more proactively versus reactively, and 3) the attentiveness of leadership in staying engaged and following through with agreed upon improvement-related tasks. These additional analyses are presented below.

*Focus of Work*

Research literature describes instructional leadership as a key ingredient for successful districts and schools (Fullan, 1985; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Hoyle, English, & Steffy, 1998; Murphy & Hallinger, 1986; Smith & Andrews, 1989). SEDL research team members analyzed site contact records and interview responses to determine whether superintendents and principals are more oriented toward instruction or operations and management. A three-point rubric categorized superintendents' and principals' instructional perspectives. The rubric classified superintendents and principals as "focused on instruction" when their interactions with SEDL and the leadership teams emphasized instruction and student learning, and when they devoted substantial time to overseeing both. Superintendents and principals fell in the "focus on management" category when their interactions with SEDL and the leadership teams devoted substantial time to operations, personnel, budgets, school board, and community. The rubric contained a "mixed" category for those who did not seem to emphasize one over the other. Table 15 displays these data.

Table 15
Leadership Focus

| Focus of superintendent | | | Focus of principal[a] | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Instruction** | **Mixed** | **Operations** | **Instruction** | **Mixed** | **Operations** |
| | Athens<br>High Meadows<br>Hwy Jct<br>Wrightsville | Bayou City<br>Bricktown<br>Cottonwood<br>Delta Village<br>Desert Hills<br>Farmville<br>Forked River<br>Mesa<br>Piedmont<br>River City<br>SW City<br>Wash City | 1 Athens<br>2 Bricktown<br>1 Farmville<br>1 Mesa<br>1 Wash City | 1 Bayou City<br>1 Desert Hills<br>1 High Meadows<br>1 Hwy Jct<br>1 Mesa<br>1 Piedmont<br>1 Wash City | 1 Athens<br>1 Bayou City<br>1 Cottonwood<br>2 Delta Village<br>1 Desert Hills<br>1 Farmville<br>2 Forked River<br>1 Hwy Jct<br>1 Piedmont<br>2 River City<br>2 SW City |

[a] Experience is recorded for principals separately. N=29.

The rubric did not classify any of the 16 superintendents as instructional leaders. Twelve attend mainly to operations and management. Four of the 16 fell into the "mixed" category. Nine of the principals concentrate on operations, seven are mixed, and six focus on instruction. These excerpts from the site contact records and interview responses characterize the leadership focus found at many sites:

> Our principals' need to take more of a role in leading their schools' curriculum [should] be stressed more. That has to come from the higher ups. Our superintendent, our assistant, do an excellent job, but they need to get into the schools more, and take more of a part in it. Everybody needs direction, and if you gave me more, than I would do better. (Athens)

> I think that we don't have any direction. The principal is well-liked but she has poor management skills. Our curriculum needs strengthening. Everybody does in their own classroom whatever they want to do. (Cottonwood)

> I don't think they have done a very good job of explaining exactly what teachers need to be doing. I think we all know we need to be teaching our frameworks, be on duty on time, and as far as that. I don't think anyone has said that

> teachers are required to [do] this, this, this, and this. I'm not sure that we're evaluated. We're observed, but I don't know how much. We turn in our lesson plans, they see what we teach, but I don't [know] if our administration really knows what's being taught in our classrooms. I think they would be surprised if they knew a lot of things. (Piedmont)

> I'm not sure all of our administrators knew or cared what we were doing because they see themselves as managers of the building rather than managers of the curriculum. (Wrightsville)

*Leadership Style of Action*

The research team used a three-point rubric to determine from site contact records and interviews whether superintendents and principals were more proactive or reactive in their actions. The rubric categorized superintendents and principals as "proactive leaders" if, in interactions with SEDL and the leadership team, they tended to be organized, had procedures in place, and anticipated changes that their districts or schools faced. They were classified as "reactive leaders," on the other hand, if they tended to be disorganized, operated from their hip pocket, and were caught by surprise when changes occurred in their interactions with SEDL and the leadership teams. Leaders in low-performing districts and schools often operate in crisis mode, responding to each crisis as it arises instead of getting ahead of the curve (Barnes, 2002; Corallo & McDonald, 2002; Elmore & Burney, 1998). Those who did not seem to behave in one style over the other fell into the "mixed" category. Table 16 presents these data.

Table 16
Leadership Style of Action

| Superintendent style of action | | | Principal style of action | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Proactive** | **Mixed** | **Reactive** | **Proactive** | **Mixed** | **Reactive** |
| Athens<br>Wash City | Bayou City<br>Farmville<br>Hwy Jct<br>Wrightsville | Bricktown<br>Cottonwood<br>Delta Village<br>Desert Hills<br>Forked River<br>High Meadows<br>Mesa<br>Piedmont<br>River City<br>SW City | 1 Athens<br>2 Bricktown<br>1 Farmville<br>1 Mesa<br>1 Piedmont<br>1 Wash City | 1 Bayou City<br>1 Desert Hills<br>1 Hwy Jct<br>1 Mesa | 1 Athens<br>1 Bayou City<br>1 Cottonwood<br>2 Delta Village<br>1 Desert Hills<br>1 Farmville<br>2 Forked River<br>1 High Meadows<br>1 Hwy Jct<br>1 Piedmont<br>2 River City<br>2 SW City<br>1 Wash City<br>1 Wrightsville |

[a] Experience is recorded for principals separately. N=29.

Table 16 shows that two of the 16 superintendents are proactive, 10 are reactive, and four are mixed. Seven of the principals are proactive, four are mixed, and 18 are reactive. The interview response below illustrates that interviewees do no think most superintendents and principals take initiative, but instead respond to concerns as they arise:

> If you are not careful, you fall into the trap of putting out fires. Get to the end of the day, and not keeping our eye on the goal. (Forked River)

*Leadership Attentiveness*

Like the other two dimensions, research team members used a three-point rubric to determine from site contact records and interviews superintendents' and principals' track records in staying engaged and following through with agreed upon tasks. The rubric categorized superintendents and principals as "attentive" if they followed through on assignments and actions agreed upon in the leadership team meetings or other

interactions with SEDL. They were "inattentive" if they did not follow through on those assignments or actions and a "mixed" category if they were inconsistent in their attentiveness. Table 17 summarizes these data.

Table 17
Leadership Attentiveness

| Superintendent attentiveness | | | Principal attentiveness | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **High** | **Moderate** | **Low** | **High** | **Moderate** | **Low** |
| Bayou City<br>Hwy Jct | Bricktown<br>Delta Village | Athens<br>Cottonwood<br>Desert Hills<br>Farmville<br>Forked River<br>High Meadows<br>Mesa<br>Piedmont<br>River City<br>SW City<br>Wash City<br>Wrightsville | 1 Athens<br>1 Bayou City<br>2 Bricktown<br>1 Delta Village<br>1 Farmville<br>1 Hwy Jct<br>1 Mesa | 1 Delta Village<br>1 Desert Hills<br>1 Farmville<br>1 Mesa<br>1 River City<br>1 Wash City | 1 Athens<br>1 Bayou City<br>1 Cottonwood<br>1 Desert Hills<br>2 Forked River<br>1 High Meadows<br>1 Hwy Jct<br>2 Piedmont<br>1 River City<br>2 SW City<br>1 Wash City<br>1 Wrightsville |

[a] Experience is recorded for principals separately. N=29.

Twelve of the 16 superintendents had low attention to follow-through. Only two of the 16 superintendents were attentive and two were mixed. The track record for principals is slightly better, with about half (n=15) categorized as inattentive. Eight were attentive and six were mixed. The following site contact record and interview response illustrate the pattern of low attentiveness seen in many of the sites:

> I think you should know that our relationship with SEDL is giving us more focused follow-up. We have initiated a lot of things in the past, we missed the target in following up. We have not been consistent…We had teacher inservice in October and then in our meeting [with SEDL], SEDL asked us to list what we were going to use to monitor ways to teach reading and what we were going to look for when we visited classrooms, based on the inservice. It just knocked our props out from under us. We were ready to move on

> with school, we just had no follow-up plans. They woke us up. They keep us on task. (Forked River)

Based on these data, a majority of these districts and schools face numerous leadership challenges they must overcome to make lasting improvements. Most important is their leadership's focus on operations and management at the expense of instruction. If districts or schools are going to increase student achievement, leadership must increase the attention they give to instructional concerns. What superintendents spend their time on sends a clear message to principals, and likewise for the messages that principals send to classroom teachers. In addition, many superintendents and principals need to improve their follow-through.

As noted above, SEDL's model does not explicitly address leadership in either the components or competencies. One of the competencies, building capacity, indirectly addresses leadership; however, most of the activities in building capacity have concentrated on strengthening teachers' skills, not administrators' skills. SEDL field staff believe that leadership across the sites is sufficiently problematic that they initiated a leadership institute for site leaders in June 2003. However, additional refinements to the *Working Systemically* model may be necessary given both the prevalence and significance of this leadership problem across the 16 sites.

**Commitment of Sites to Improve Outcomes for All Students**

The issues of equity and excellence also emerged in the analysis of the site contact records and interviews. A frequently heard remark in many of these sites was that their students face difficult home situations or have limited opportunities once they complete school, so why should educators insist that all students meet high expectations? (See Table 5)

The issue of expectations seems to have a number of different dimensions. One, many students come from backgrounds different from their teachers. Teachers do not always understand the use of language—as in the combined English/other language of aboriginal or Hispanic speakers—or the cultural norms that might influence achievement and the ways to work with it. Two, students may come from depressed areas where teachers as well as students do not have any examples that represent high achievement. In these cases, teachers and even students may think they are working for achievement, but that achievement does not measure up to what it means in other contexts. What looks like fifth-grade work to them might be third-grade work to another district or school. Finally, teachers, in empathy with the plight of students, do not ask them to achieve academically at school.

Low-performing sites have historically struggled with poverty and the resultant stress on the organization, limited resources, low expectations and low achievement, high teacher turnover, low teacher salaries, crisis orientation, frequent dropout issues, poor attendance and safety, short-term planning, and, most importantly, lack of confidence (Corallo & McDonald, 2002). Low-performing sites need to "see themselves as capable" (Barnes, 2002) and in doing so see their students as capable of improving academically.

While SEDL cannot change the larger community that is influencing educational achievement, it hypothesizes that directing the whole system toward behaviors related to higher-performing environments will result in a change in how the system responds to achievement needs. Teachers' and students' seeing achievement happen sets the stage for higher expectations. As one teacher said:

> I see things differently this year than last year (after working to raise student achievement scores). Last year

> was an eye-opening experience for most teachers as we tried to quickly improve the grades. We didn't change anything but we became more aware of the big picture and of us as a whole. We're working together better because of it. (High Meadows)

As described in the SEDL model, behaviors related to higher performance include looking at data and using it for planning, creating coherence across the organization to increase alignment between state standards and classroom work, and building capacity through developing the knowledge, skills, and supports necessary for teacher satisfaction and student achievement. SEDL field staff have asked educators in the 16 sites to examine their expectations and practice to help them understand that all students can be successful and develop strategies to make sure that happens. These questions fit easily into the creating-coherence competency, but they may require more structured activities to highlight and address.

**Modification in the *Working Systemically* Model**

As may be expected in developing and testing a complex model in multiple field sites, SEDL field staff have made adaptations as they tried to meet the needs and demands of educators in these sites. These adaptations often occurred because of site preferences (i.e., preference to have activities move forward first at the school level to demonstrate to the state education agency, local school board, or community that action had been taken to address the problems at a low-performing school, pressing concerns that took priority for some time). These adaptations, though not systematically planned and implemented, provide an opportunity in the early stages of model development to explore different options and learn how best to proceed. SEDL field staff made three significant changes in the model based on their experiences in these 16 sites.

*Site Recruitment*

As noted earlier in the report, SEDL recruited three sites that did not continue in this R&D effort because of changes in leadership at the superintendent level, a lack of commitment to this process on the part of the district, and insufficient alignment between SEDL's model and the district's philosophy and operations. In the latter two cases, SEDL field staff members felt that some of these "false starts" could have been avoided if they had gathered more information about the district prior to committing to work with it. For example, the prevailing management style in one of the "false-start" sites was top-down. This management orientation directly conflicts with the collaborative teamwork approach emphasized in SEDL's model. If SEDL and the district had spent more time together before making a commitment to work together, they might have realized that SEDL's model was not a good choice for this district.

After discussing these data, SEDL decided to make Data Scan and Site Entry part of the same stage and reverse the order in which they are completed. Formal commitments to work together on either SEDL's or the district's part will be delayed until after the Data Scan/Site Entry stage is completed. This will give both SEDL and the site more time to get to know each other and gauge how each other works.

*Staging of Work*

Activities occur at multiple levels of the system (i.e., district, school) in an integrated manner in SEDL's model. The original model called for the district and school to begin simultaneously and to be brought together by the end of the Planning Action stage. As of December 2002, at least 1 year after activities had started in all but two sites, only one fourth of the sites are engaged in activities at multiple levels of the system in a

connected way (see Table 8). In one case (i.e., Wrightsville), no meaningful activities are occurring at the school level related to SEDL's model, although activities are continuing at the district level. In many more cases, meaningful activities are proceeding at one or both schools, but activities at the district level are peripheral or tangential to the improvement of student performance in reading or mathematics (e.g., Athens, Cottonwood, Farmville, Highway Junction, Southwest City, and Washington City). Many districts claim that low student achievement is an individual school problem and expect SEDL's Working Systemically model to "fix the school." Few district-level staff members are ready to acknowledge that they have some responsibility for student achievement and often resist tackling this problem.

When SEDL field staff permitted activities to move forward at the school level without significant district work also commencing (e.g., Cottonwood, High Meadows, Highway Junction, and Mesa), they experienced increasing difficulty in engaging district-level staff in SEDL's model as time passed. Furthermore, when meaningful activities related to student achievement are progressing at both levels, they are often not connected (see Table 8). Each team is busy, but the actions at the two levels do not connect to each other. This disconnectedness is not likely to maximize desired outcomes for either team, much less the system as a whole.

In reviewing these data, SEDL field staff realized that they needed to make refinements to their model. These adaptations will help engage district-level staff in meaningful student achievement and connect district- and school-level activities. SEDL field staff have decided to sequence the efforts at the district and school levels so that district activities precede individual school efforts. SEDL field staff also have learned

that individual school efforts should build off of the district's "root cause" problem statement developed during the Systems Exploration stage. This will help ensure that activities at both levels are integrated.

***Focus on Reading and Mathematics***

Another critical feature of SEDL's model is its requirement that districts and schools focus on improving student achievement in either reading or mathematics. This emphasis is discussed as part of the recruitment process as well as during the first two stages of the model (i.e., Data Scan/Site Entry and Systems Exploration stages). In spite of this emphasis, five of the 16 sites did not end the Systems Exploration stage with an explicit reading or mathematics focus (see Table 11). Although all of the districts had agreed to concentrate on one of these two areas, this agreement sometimes fell aside as other priorities emerged (e.g., newly funded programs, state mandates, violence and vandalism). Districts that did not complete the self-assessment with a specific focus on improving reading or mathematics also more frequently did not end up with a clear plan for improving student achievement in their target area (see Table 12).

These findings prompted three additional refinements in SEDL's model. First, field staff modified the District Self-Assessment instrument and Systems Exploration protocol to reinforce the desired endpoint. Second, staff altered the Planning Action protocol to emphasize and highlight the interconnections between the District Self-Assessment and the action plan created in the Planning Action stage. Field staff will test these changes to instruments and protocols in a second set of sites with which SEDL is starting work in FY03. And finally, SEDL field staff received additional training and mentoring to help them understand the importance of ending the Systems Exploration

stage with an explicit focus on student achievement in reading or mathematics. Altogether, these modifications should help strengthen and reinforce the emphasis given to improving student achievement in reading or mathematics.

## 7. Summary and Next Steps

This report describes SEDL's work with 16 districts and 29 schools to develop and refine a systemic model to support improvement in student reading and mathematics achievement. SEDL field staff developed and used the *Working Systemically* model and set of protocols to guide the activities in these districts and schools. SEDL research team members analyzed three primary data sources to prepare this report—descriptive data about the sites, site contact records completed by SEDL field staff after each contact with a district or school, and two rounds of interviews conducted by SEDL research staff.

**Testing of SEDL's Model**

SEDL and the 16 districts and 29 schools have made substantial progress in implementing the model in these sites. All of the sites are involved in improvement efforts, although there is great variability in how directly or quickly their efforts will impact student achievement. Some districts and schools are currently attending to other improvement concerns that do not suggest the same immediacy of impact on student achievement. To fully test and refine SEDL's model in these latter sites, field staff members are redirecting the activities of these teams to connect them more explicitly to student achievement outcomes.

**SEDL's *Working Systemically* Model**

SEDL's model has three dimensions—levels, components, and competencies. Twelve of the 16 sites have been engaged in activities at multiple levels—generally at the district and school levels. Only four of the sites have interconnected activities occurring at multiple levels. Another eight of the sites have activities occurring at multiple levels, but they are disconnected. District and school efforts may eventually come together in

some of these latter sites, although the likelihood of this happening is low because of the particular paths each has chosen. This disconnectedness most likely occurred as a result of a design flaw in SEDL's model; activities started at both the district and school levels simultaneously, so they ran on parallel but not necessarily intersecting paths.

Almost all of the sites are involved in improvement efforts related to some combination of three components of SEDL's model—curriculum and instruction, assessment, and professional staff. About half are working on the standards component. These are consistent with other researchers' findings about how to help low-performing districts and schools make significant and lasting improvements (Barnes, 2002; Holdzkom, 2001; McDiarmid & Corcoran, 2000).

The sites have paid little attention to the policy and governance, resources, and family and community components. This is not surprising given the pressure and urgency most low-performing districts and schools feel to make substantial improvements in student test scores (Holdzkom, 2001). However, SEDL's model stipulates that districts and schools also need to consider these other three components as they proceed with their improvement efforts. These latter three components may receive more attention as districts and schools move forward with improvement plans; issues related to both policy and governance and resources are likely to arise as improvement plans challenge existing policies and rules or demand resources that have not traditionally been available. The family and community component also may come into play as districts and schools look for support for and assistance in implementing their improvement plans.

SEDL also hypothesized that low-performing districts and schools need to improve their skills in five areas: 1) collecting, interpreting, and using data, 2) creating

coherence, 3) forging alliances, 4) building capacity, and 5) promoting innovation. Analyses of the site contact records suggested that these are, in fact, areas of weakness in this sample of districts and schools, and activities are underway to build mastery in the first four of the five competencies. SEDL field staff continue helping districts and schools collect, interpret, and use student achievement and other data to guide decision making. Activities at the district and school levels also have begun to create coherence and engage administrators and teachers in ways that they have never worked before (i.e., forging alliances). Not surprisingly, the building capacity competency was easily addressed in almost all of the sites; professional development for teachers was an obvious choice of action, especially if SEDL was willing to step in and deliver these sessions.

Promoting innovation was the only competency that did not receive much attention in these sites. This competency involves the investigation of different strategies to address specific problems. Given the stage in which most of the districts and schools are, their lack of work related to this competency was unexpected. SEDL field staff are currently discussing changes in the Planning Action protocol; this seems to be an area where more explicit guidance may be needed.

**Other Critical Issues That Have Emerged**

Two issues have emerged that influence SEDL's success in testing and refining this model—district and school leadership capacity and commitment to improve outcomes for all students.

SEDL's *Working Systemically* model does not explicitly address leadership and its influence on school reform. Activities in the 16 sites have clearly underscored how critical leadership is in directing and sustaining reform efforts at the district and school

levels. In particular, most of these sites do not have leadership that emphasizes instruction rather than operations and management, that is proactive rather than reactive, and that follows through and stays engaged on improvement efforts. Without increased leadership capacity, it is questionable that many of these sites will be able to make and sustain lasting changes that will impact student achievement positively. SEDL held a weeklong institute for district and school leaders in mid-June as a first step to address this limited capacity. However, SEDL field staff must give additional consideration to including leadership in their model more specifically, given its apparent influence and impact on reform efforts.

A final issue that emerged in the analysis of data about these sites concerns equity and excellence. Many districts and schools do not hold high expectations for all students. In fact, educators reported that their expectations have decreased for these students, often because of students' family situations and career opportunities. SEDL field staff address these "values" implicitly as part of their work with sites on the components (e.g., standards, curriculum and instruction, and assessment) and competencies (e.g., creating coherence). However, these low expectations are deep-seated beliefs in many districts and schools and may need more explicit discussion if much headway is to be made.

**Refinements to the *Working Systemically* Model**

Based on activities to date in the 16 sites, SEDL field staff have modified the *Working Systemically* model to increase its responsiveness to the needs of sites and enhance the likelihood that educators will successfully implement the model in a variety of settings.

First, SEDL field staff decided to combine the Data Scan and Site Entry stages and reverse their order. In addition, field staff do not formally consider districts and schools as test sites until after the Site Entry/Data Scan stage is completed. Staff previously accepted sites before starting this stage, but they made this change because of a number of false starts that might have been prevented if they had known more about district and school operations as well as commitment to this approach. It also will give districts more time to learn about SEDL and its *Working Systemically* model. By delaying this decision, both parties will be able to make a more informed decision about their work together.

Second, SEDL has decided to sequence the activities at the district and school levels. In the originally proposed model, districts and schools began their activities simultaneously. As noted earlier, only a few of the sites have interconnected activities occurring at multiple levels. To increase the likelihood of this happening in the future, activities will begin first at the district level and will be used to focus individual school-level activities. This change will help to ensure that the activities at the two levels are directed at the same problem and connected in important ways.

Third, district and school work in SEDL's model will focus explicitly on improving student achievement in reading or mathematics. Although all of the sites have made a commitment to improve student achievement in one of these areas, a close examination of their work showed variability in the degree to which current activities connect directly to student achievement. To strengthen this intended focus, SEDL field staff have made refinements to the Systems Exploration protocol and instrument (i.e., District Self-Assessment), have highlighted connections between the District Self-

Assessment and action plan template (in the Action Planning stage), and have received additional training and mentoring.

**Next Steps**

These early findings suggest that SEDL has made progress in developing and refining its model in the initial sample of 16 districts and 29 schools. Development and refinement of the model will continue in this initial sample of sites using the protocols designed for each stage. SEDL field staff will closely monitor activities in the sites to ensure that the model is being implemented with fidelity, and document modifications when they occur. These modifications will be incorporated into the model's design when appropriate. To preserve the usefulness of the site in the development and refinement process, SEDL field staff should redirect the activities of the district or school leadership team to focus on improving student achievement when implementation of the model strays in a particular site.

As noted above, SEDL field staff have made some changes in their model and will test these changes in a second sample of sites that began working with SEDL in Spring 2003. As the first sample of sites continues progressing through the model's stages, SEDL field staff will identify and make additional changes, and test them in the second sample of sites. Field staff should receive professional development to ensure that they are knowledgeable about changes in the model and their implications to site activities.

In addition, collection and analysis of data from the sites will continue. SEDL field staff will complete site contact records to document the progress of implementing the model in the sites. SEDL research team members will conduct five additional rounds

of interviews to monitor the district and school leadership teams as well as district and school operations (Spring 2003, Fall 2003, Spring 2004, Fall 2004, Spring 2005). Outcome data also will be collected annually, including surveys that measure the site's capacity to work systemically and student test scores on state-mandated achievement tests. Subsequent reports will include analyses of outcome data and thus provide evidence of the model's impact.

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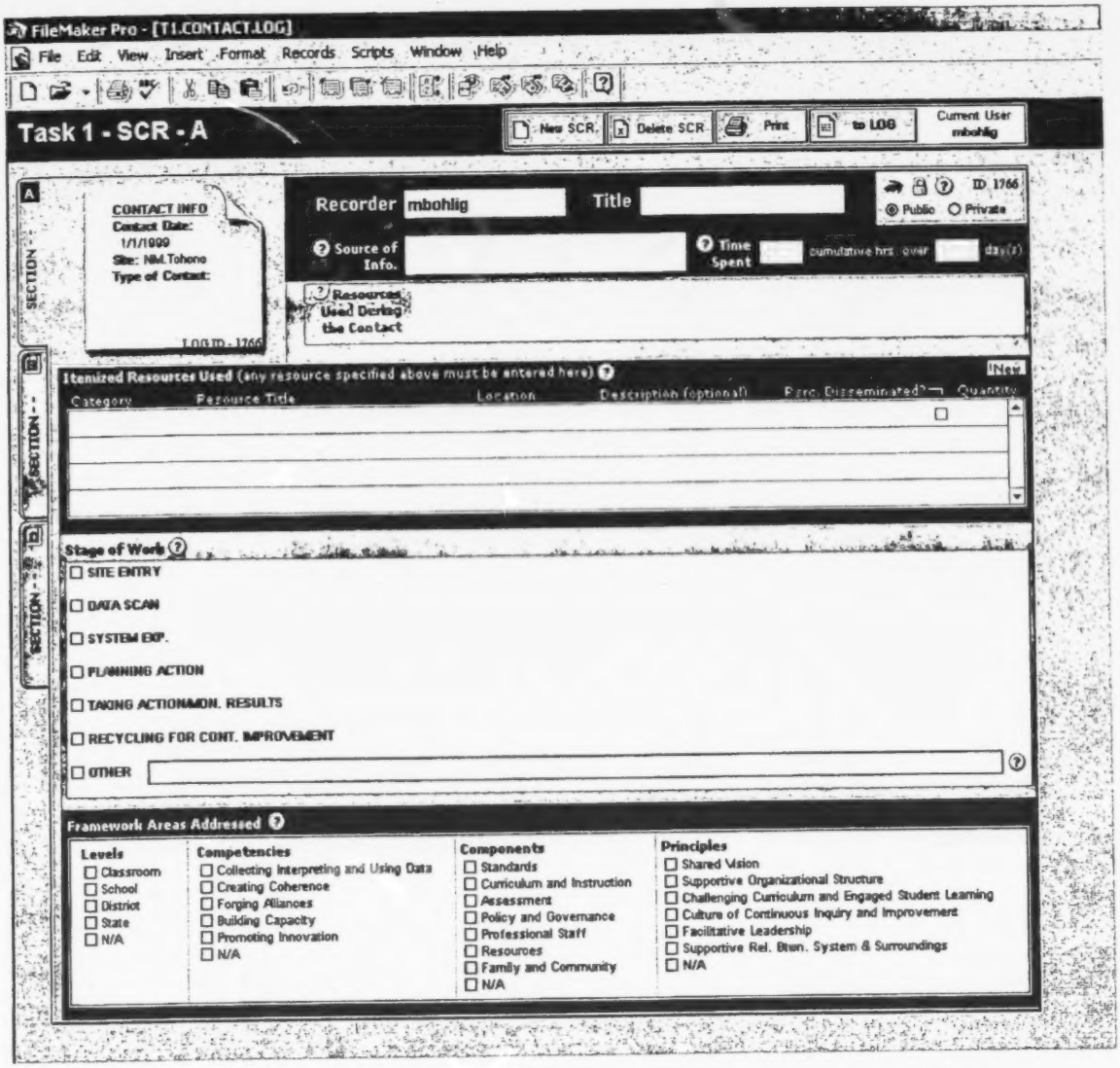
# Appendix A

# Site Contact Record

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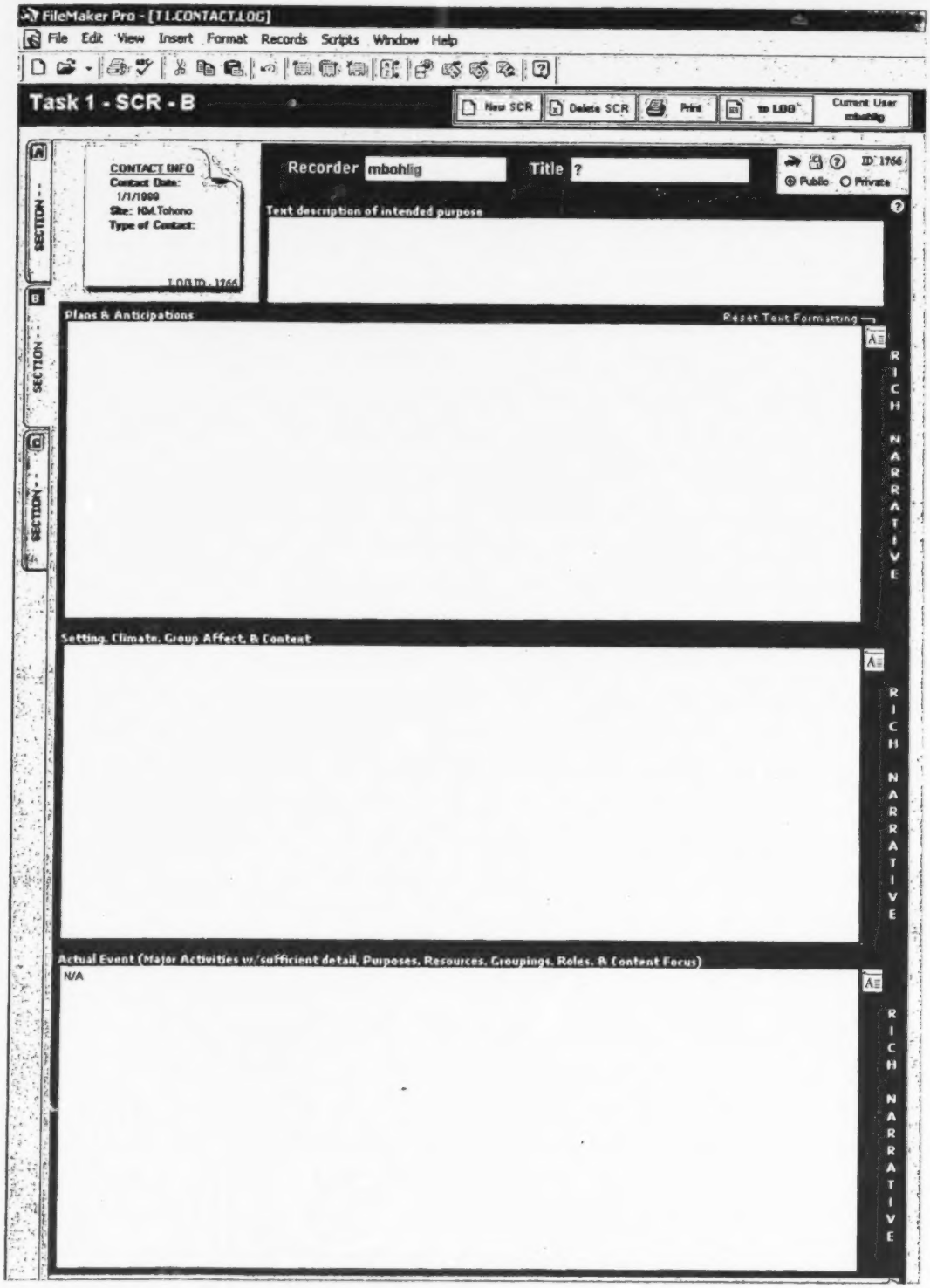




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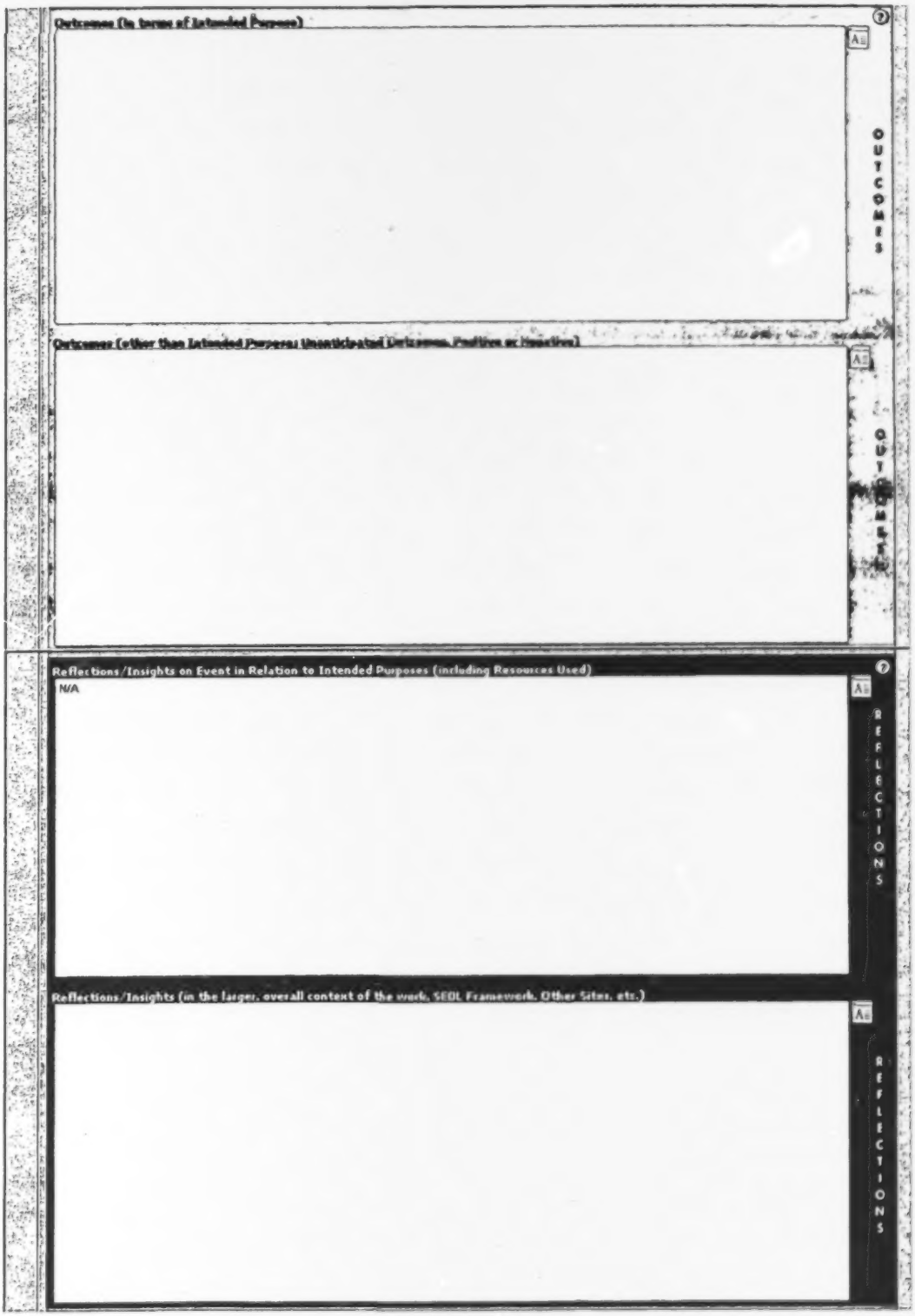
Outcomes (in terms of Intended Purposes)
OUTCOMES
Outcomes (other than Intended Purposes; Unanticipated Outcomes, Positive or Negative)
OUTCOMES
Reflections/Insights on Event in Relation to Intended Purposes (including Resources Used)
N/A
REFLECTIONS
Reflections/Insights (in the larger, overall context of the work, SEOL Framework, Other Sites, etc.)
REFLECTIONS



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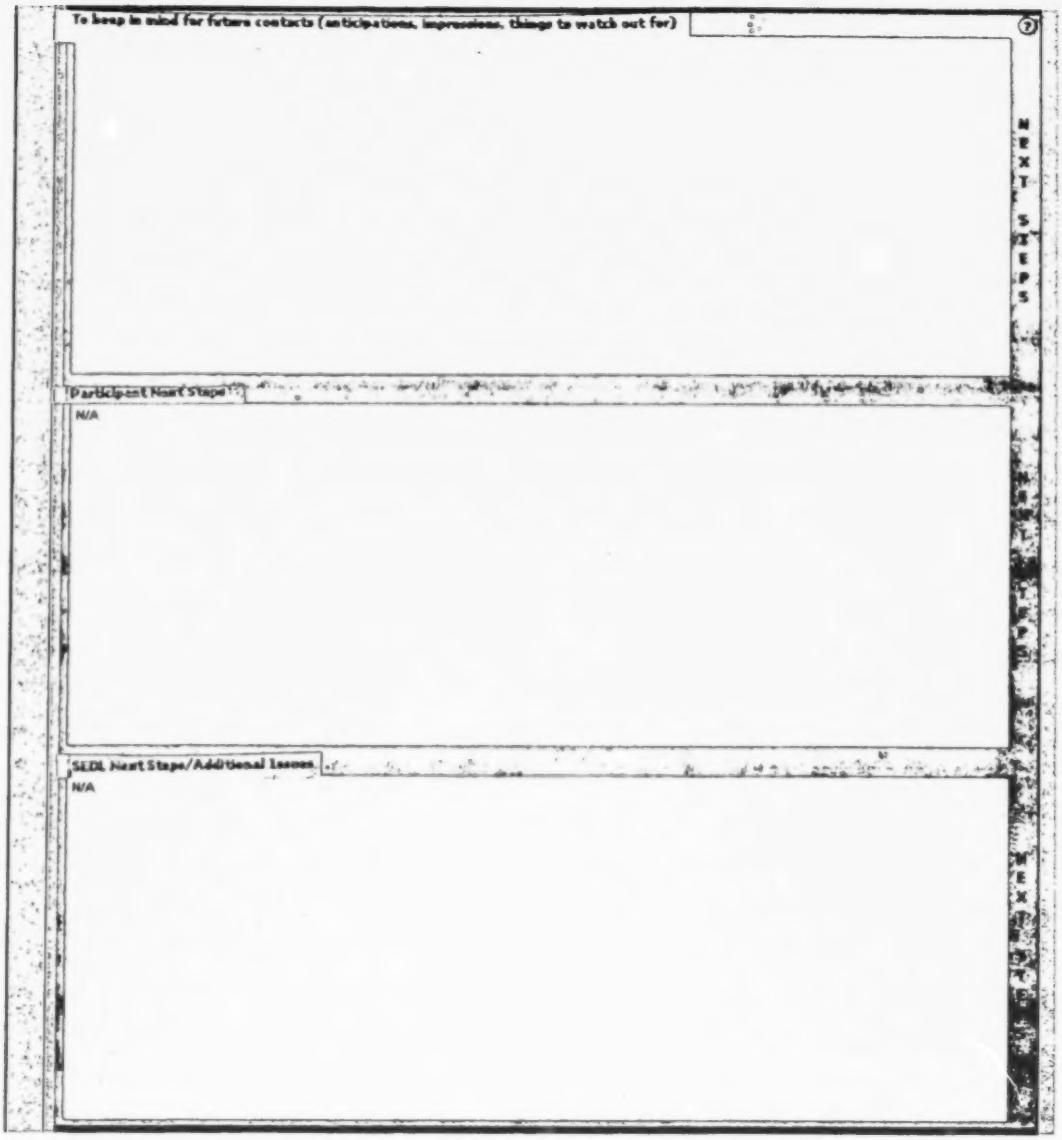
To keep in mind for future contacts (anticipations, impressions, things to watch out for)
NEXT STEPS
Participant Next Steps
N/A
SEDL Next Steps/Additional Issues
N/A

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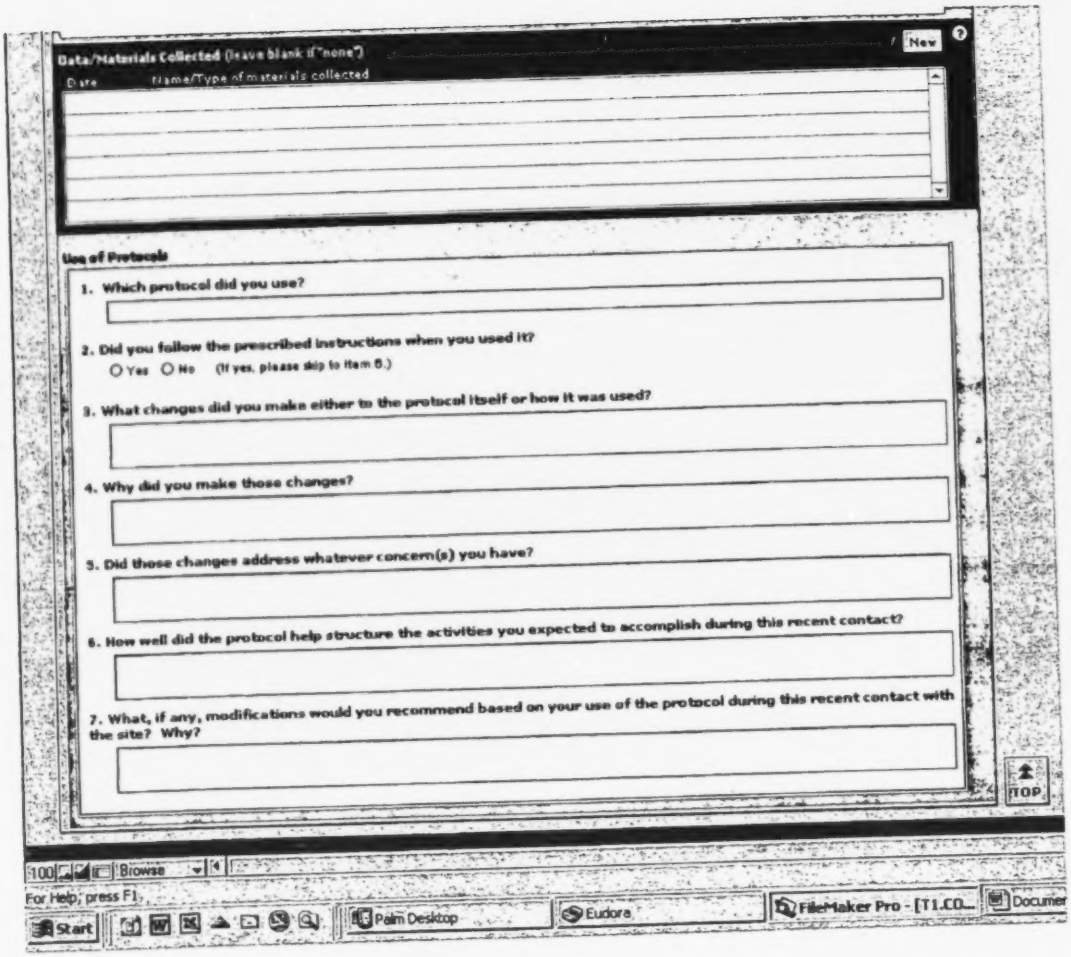
Data/Materials Collected (leave blank if "none")
Date
Name/Type of materials collected
New
Use of Protocols
1. Which protocol did you use?
2. Did you follow the prescribed instructions when you used it?
Yes No (If yes, please skip to item 5.)
3. What changes did you make either to the protocol itself or how it was used?
4. Why did you make those changes?
5. Did those changes address whatever concern(s) you have?
6. How well did the protocol help structure the activities you expected to accomplish during this recent contact?
7. What, if any, modifications would you recommend based on your use of the protocol during this recent contact with the site? Why?
TOP
100
Browse
For Help, press F1
Start
Palm Desktop
Eudora
FileMaker Pro - [T1.CO...
Documer

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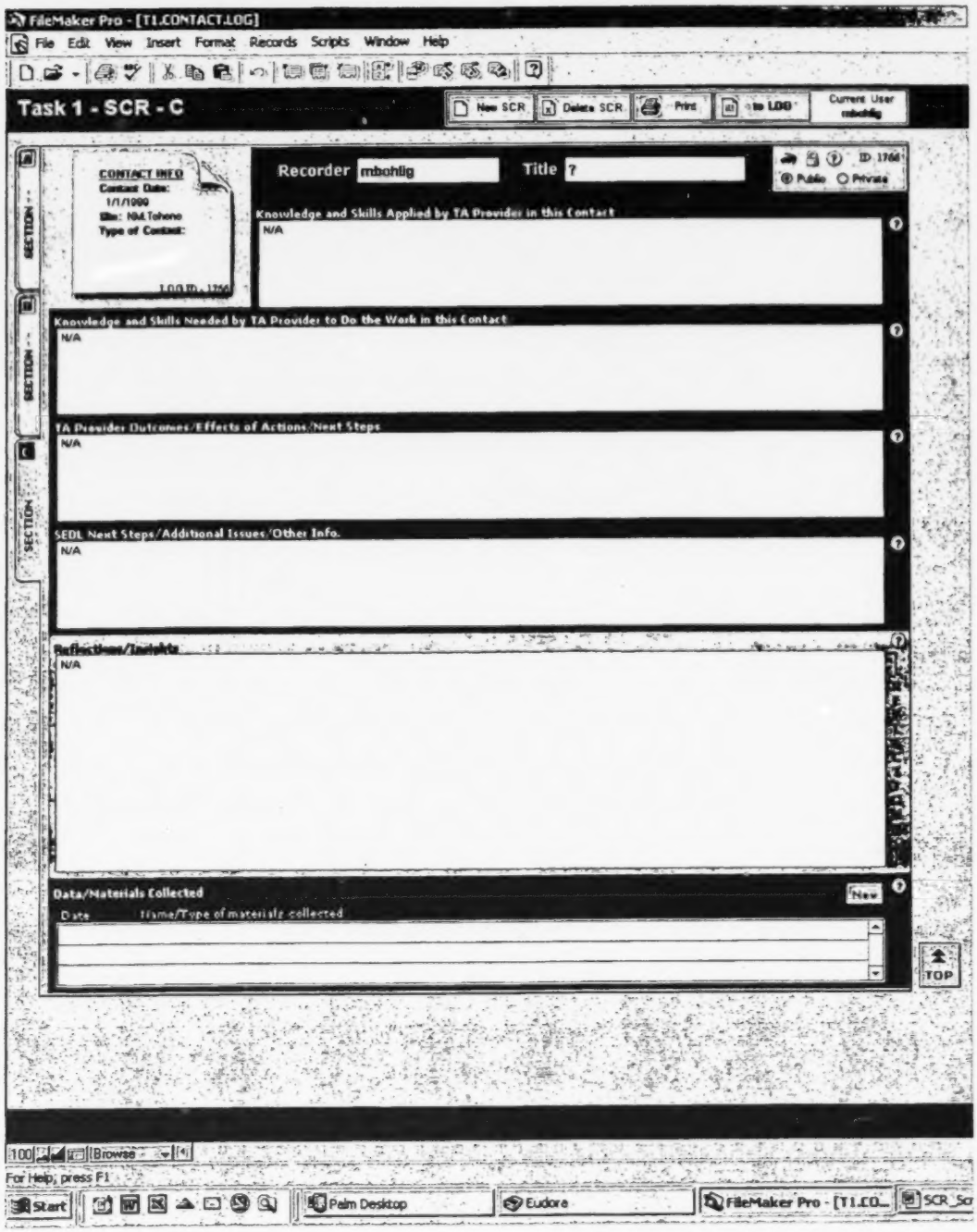


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# Appendix B

# Interview Protocols

## Spring Interview Protocol

Site: _____ Date: _____

School: _____ Time: _____

Respondent: _____ Interviewer: _____

1. Please tell me about an important work relationship that you have with one of your colleagues. Describe the relationship. What do you talk about? Why do you get together? What do you do when you get together?

2. Could you describe a recent problem that your district or school has had to deal with? How was it dealt with, and what decisions were made? What has the outcome been? What could have been done differently that would have made things happen better?

3. Are you hearing any different kinds of things being talked about, in terms of what is possible in the school and/or district? What do you think of it? What kinds of things are being done that support the new talk?

4. What is the professional development like in your district? What is the professional development like in your school? What kinds of opportunities do you have for professional development? Who takes advantage of them? Who manages the professional development and ensures that it is of good quality that meets staff needs? What are the benefits of this professional development for the teachers and students, and what impact does this have on their performance?

5. What kinds of collaboration (formal and informal) do you do with colleagues? What kinds of resources are available to support your doing this? How does your collaboration with colleagues impact your classroom practice?

6. What is assessment like? What happens to the results of student assessments, how are they used? How do your own assessments impact your classroom practice? How do the state-mandated assessments impact your classroom practice?

7. Tell me about your students, the current cohort of students that you have. What do you think of their future? What do you think holds them back from having the best future they could have? Are there any of your students who you believe will have a different future from the rest? Why, what are they like? (Probe for values and beliefs about student learning.)

8. How are resources (including time and space) allocated in your school? Who makes those allocation decisions? How much do you participate in those decisions?

9. How much coordination and/or alignment do you see between what is taught in your school/district, and your state's standards? What help do you receive to bring what is taught into closer alignment with state standards? How much coordination and/or alignment do you see between the district and your school? If not much, what would help in creating more? How much coordination and/or alignment do you see between adjacent grades? Are curriculum decisions for one grade made in coordination with what is taught in the previous year? If not, what would be involved in doing that?

10. Who are the leaders in your district? In your school? Describe them. (These could be anyone, they don't have to be only the superintendent or principal.) Do these leaders effectively accomplish the goals and tasks of what you believe leaders should do? Why or why not? What leadership roles do you fill, or would you like to fill? Are there changes in the way those roles are filled, that you think would benefit the school and/or district?

11. What is the interaction like between your school and your district, with families and community members? Describe a typical interaction that you might have with a parent.

## Fall Interview Protocol

Site: _____ Date: _____

School: _____ Time: _____

Respondent: _____ Interviewer: _____

1. Tell me a little about your school and district. I am especially interested in its priorities and how people work together.
   ISSUES:
   CURRENT PRIORITIES OF SCHOOL AND DISTRICT?
   HOW IS DISTRICT WORKING ON PRIORITIES?
   HOW IS SCHOOL WORKING ON PRIORITIES?
   HOW HAVE PRIORITIES AFFECTED YOU IN YOUR ROLE?
   RELATION TO READING AND MATH?

2. What does the school or district expect of teachers and students (examples: high quality instruction, use of assessment for planning, communicating with others, working together, etc.)?
   ISSUES:
   HOW HAVE EXPECTATIONS BEEN COMMUNCIATED?
   BY WHOM?
   EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENTS?
   HOW COMMUNICATED, BY WHOM?

3. How much coordination or alignment do you see between what is taught in your school(s) and the state curriculum standards?
   ISSUES:
   ALIGNMENT ACROSS SCHOOLS WITHIN A DISTRICT
   BETWEEN ADJACENT GRADES
   HOW COULD ALIGNMENT BE IMPROVED?

4. Do teachers in your school and district work together to solve problems or plan for changes?
   ISSUES:
   HOW? GIVE ME AN EXAMPLE
   ANY CHANGES DUE TO WORKING WITH OTHER TEACHERS?
   COLLABORATION RE READING/MATH?

5. Can you give me an example of a project that is coordinated or aligned across schools in the district, grade levels, and classrooms? What about reading or math?

6. Tell me about your classroom and the resources available to you.
   By resources we mean time, materials, space, staff/personnel, professional development, or other professional learning opportunities.

   Phrase re role: tell me about resources available to teachers and what role do you have in coordinating or providing resources.
   ISSUES:
   WHERE DO YOU/TEACHERS GO IF SOMETHING IS NEEDED?
   DOES EVERYONE HAVE ACCESS TO SAME RESOURCES?
   WHO DECIDES ABOUT ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES?

7. How does professional development occur in your school/district?
   ISSUES:
   WHO DECIDES ABOUT WHAT KIND OF PD IS OFFERED?
   WHO IS INVOLVED IN PD ACTIVITES?
   (teachers, teachers plus others, principals, etc.)
   WHAT KINDS OF ACTIVITIES OCCUR?
   (information only, practice activities, classroom modeling, group discussion, problem solving).
   WHO LEADS PD SESSIONS?
   WHAT KIND OF PD HAS OCCURRED RE READING/MATH?
   ROLE: HOW DOES FOLLOW-UP OCCUR?

8. What do you hope to accomplish at your school/district over the next year?

# Appendix C

## Profiles of Sites

**Site: Athens**
**Focus of Work: Mathematics**

**General Description**

- Geographic: rural/small town
- District size: large (>10,000)
- School size:
  - Middle school: large (>500)
  - High school: large (>500)
- District number of teachers: Large (>500)
- Free or reduced price lunch: 60%
- Ethnicity: 50% White, 50% African American
- Grade range: K-12

This district is located in the southern part of its state in a small town, about 25 miles from a much larger city in the area.

SEDL is working with a middle school and high school; the two are part of a larger feeder system in the district. The district has more than 30 schools, some do fairly well on state assessments and others do not. Overall, the district's student achievement results in mathematics indicated that approximately one fourth of the students do not meet state benchmarks. Approximately one third of the middle school students and two fifths of the high school students do not meet state benchmarks in mathematics.

**Implementation of SEDL's Model**

The Athens School District decided to focus its work with SEDL on raising student achievement in mathematics. Three teams have been organized to conduct the work, one at the district level and one at each of two schools (middle and high schools). Although some initial work began in the district toward the end of the 2001-02 school year, work in earnest did not begin until the following fall. Just as the work was poised to take off, two major hurricanes disrupted the life of this community and time was needed to regroup. At the district level, the team consists of the assistant superintendent for instruction, three secondary curriculum supervisors, the supervisor of federal programs, and the director of special education; no elementary supervisors or school-level representatives are included. The team worked on, but did not complete the District Self-Assessment and Systems Exploration stage. Completion of this stage will provide an explicit direction for the team's work together.

At the middle school, the team consists of the principal, the curriculum coordinator, and five classroom teachers with varying years of experience and teaching assignments. The middle school had a school improvement plan in place, and the team decided to use its work with SEDL to support the implementation of that plan. To this end, the team was engaged in developing an innovation configuration that would depict how the school would look if the improvement plan were implemented. Development of the innovation configuration proceeded slowly and, as a result, no work occurred by the team to support the implementation of the plan. At the high school, the team consists of the principal, the two assistant principals, the counselor, and six teachers who were relatively new to the

school. This team did not identify specific work to improve mathematics performance at the high school.

**Accomplishments and Challenges**

At the end of FY02, the Athens School District was in the early stages of work with SEDL. The superintendent was eager for SEDL to work with his district, but has not played an ongoing, active role and has assigned responsibility for the district leadership team to the assistant superintendent of instruction. The majority of the district leadership team worked together effectively and was ready to tackle a significant district-wide problem. However, the lack of representation on the district team from the elementary supervisors as well as individual schools precluded a district-wide focus to the team's work.

The middle school has a dynamic new principal who took steps to focus the work of his school on improving student achievement. The middle school team worked well as a team with all members contributing as equals to their work. Their work on developing the innovation configuration moved forward slowly, but their discussions reflected the strong collaboration skills necessary for building a professional learning community. The innovation configuration emphasizes process behaviors (e.g., administration and staff demonstrate a positive attitude, and hold high expectations for themselves and the student body).

The high school team floundered, most likely due to competing demands for the principal's attention and turnover at the assistant principal level as well as the irregular attendance by team members. High school team members expressed limited understanding about the purpose of this work, their role on the team, and how to develop a school-wide focus, given the departmentalized nature of the high school.

**Site: Bayou City School District**
**Focus of Work: Mathematics**

**General Description**

- Geographic: urban fringe
- District Size: large (>10,000)
- School size:
  - Middle school: large (>500)
  - High school: very large (>1000)
- District number of teachers: very large (>1000)
- Free or reduced price lunch: 40%
- Ethnicity: 75% White, 20% African American
- Grade range:
  - Middle school: 7-9
  - High school: 9-12

The 90,000 inhabitants of Bayou City rely on local industries including seafood production, offshore oil drilling and services, shipbuilding and repair, and sugar cane farming and milling. The per capita income is less than $16,000 and the median household income is under $35,000.

Located in an urban fringe, Bayou City serves more than 15,000 students. A high school and middle school representing a feeder pattern were selected by the district for participation. The two schools represent a slightly lower socioeconomic status population than what is present throughout the rest of the district and also represent a larger percentage of African American students. Students come to these two schools from rural, bayou locations or from the inner city.

**Implementation of SEDL's Model**

Bayou City began participation in August 2002. The district decided to focus on mathematics in the two schools. Stakeholders, including teachers and building and district leaders, agreed that mathematics should be the primary focus for intensive work and agreed to aim toward aligning K-12 mathematics curriculum.

A single team, the district leadership team, was created with assistance from SEDL to conduct most of the work. This district leadership team—composed of the superintendent, two principals, district mathematics coordinators, and mathematics teachers—took 2 months and considerable effort to organize because of issues pertaining to ownership of ideas and authority. To move forward, the district leadership team created norms for working together as a cooperative and collaborative team. Soon after, the team began communicating openly. This process took nearly two thirds of the initial effort.

Formal work on mathematics at the site was delayed for 3 months while SEDL focused on building rapport and trust among site participants. Once rapport and trust were established, the district leadership team could work as a system-wide team to explore the reasons for their low performance in mathematics. The team began to discuss the mathematics curriculum and instruction and the importance of aligning the curriculum across the district. The district leadership team has not completed its review nor narrowed

its focus on a particular problem. Until this focus is identified, school-level teams will not be formed to help ensure coordination of efforts at the district and school levels.

**Accomplishments and Challenges**

Bayou City made strides toward developing its plan to increase student mathematics achievement. A major accomplishment was the formation of the district leadership team with broad representation across the district and its increased ability to work together. The team's examination of test scores and survey data appears to have opened the door for considerable progress in identifying the district's underlying difficulties.

At the same time, the site faces difficulties, among which is staffing stability at the two schools that will work with SEDL. The high school has a new principal, and the middle school principal hired a new staff consisting largely of beginning teachers. The first year in these positions is always challenging, without adding the responsibility of work with SEDL to the mix. These two schools may require additional support if the work is to move forward.

**Site: Bricktown**
**Focus of Work: Reading**

**General Description**

- Geographic: large central city
- District size: large (>10,000)
- School size:
  - Middle school: large (>500)
  - High school: large (>500)
  - District number of teachers: large (>500)
- Free or reduced price lunch: 40%
- Ethnicity: 66% White, 15% African-American, 10% Hispanic, and remaining American Indian
- Grade range: K-12

The Bricktown School District grew as families moved to the suburbs to escape a desegregation order in one of the region's largest cities. As this district has grown, the demographics of the community have changed and now there are more blue collar and low socioeconomic families residing in district neighborhoods. The per capita income is $26,297, making Bricktown one of the more wealthy communities with which SEDL is working.

The school district includes 27 schools, 18 elementary, five middle school, and three senior highs. SEDL is working with a middle school and high school that are part of a larger feeder system. The two schools are not labeled low performing by the state's accountability system. However, both schools are facing dramatic changes in their student population that threaten their academic standing as well as that of the district.

**Implementation of SEDL's Model**

The district has focused its work with SEDL on raising student achievement in reading. The work began in September 2001. The superintendent assigned responsibility for this work to the assistant superintendent for instruction. SEDL met with the superintendent to debrief him about the status of the work approximately 1 year after the work began; except for this debriefing, there has been no contact with the superintendent.

Three teams were created and are responsible for working with SEDL, the district-level team and two school-level teams. The district leadership team consists of the assistant superintendent for curriculum, the directors of elementary and secondary education, three secondary and one elementary curriculum supervisors, a board member, two principals and two teacher representatives from the schools in which SEDL is working, the principal and teacher representative of the other middle school that feeds into the high school, and an assistant principal and a teacher representative from one of the elementary schools that feeds into the middle school. An invitation to join the team was extended and accepted by the director of elementary education. The district leadership team completed the district self-assessment and, as a result, decided to focus its work on developing a clear set of written expectations for teaching reading strategies in all content areas that is clearly communicated, understood, monitored, and supported at all levels. The district team decided to focus first on defining what the expectations are at the district, school, and

classroom levels. The state standards and benchmarks define the expectations for students. The team worked on developing an innovation configuration for what the district would look like if the expectations were realized.

The middle school team, established before SEDL began working with the school, consists of the principal, assistant principal, counselor, and 12 teachers. The secondary and elementary language arts coordinators are ad hoc members of the team. Work at the middle school began at the same time as the district-level work. Most of SEDL's work occurred with grade-level teams that were focused on addressing the district's reading goal of improving reading achievement of all students. Team members examined student reading data to identify students whose reading needs are not being met, explored strategies and offered professional development to help teachers use these strategies to improve reading, and looked for ways to monitor their progress.

The high school principal formed a reading task force to focus its work in addressing the district goal. The work at the high school began approximately 1 year after the work started at the district. Eight teachers along with the principal, librarian, and director of secondary education serve on the high school's reading task force. Similar to the middle school, their work focused on identifying students whose reading needs are not being met and exploring strategies to assist teachers in meeting these needs.

**Accomplishments and Challenges**

In striking comparison to other districts in which SEDL is working, Bricktown established and moved forward on district and individual school work in a coordinated manner. An overall goal (i.e., to improve student performance in reading) was established for work at the district level and the work at each of the two schools focused on addressing the district goal. This linkage is atypical in most of SEDL's sites in which there are both district and school teams functioning. The district team now includes elementary and secondary representatives at both the district and school levels and the two schools teams include district representatives. This cross-level focus and team membership provide a foundation to help promote systems thinking.

Both school teams expressed strong commitment and involvement of the two principals. They made progress in identifying students whose reading needs are not being met and in developing and implementing plans to meet these students' needs. They did this by administering, analyzing, and discussing assessments to determine where students were. The middle school faculty met weekly in grade-level groups with the principal to discuss their work with students. The high school reading task force also met to discuss possible reading strategies and how to implement them in the classroom. Professional development was offered at both schools to the entire faculty.

**Site: Cottonwood School District**
**Focus of Work: Reading**

**General Description**

- Geographic: rural/small town
- District size: medium (3,001–9,999)
- School size:
  - High school: small (<299)
- District number of teachers: medium (201–500)
- Free or reduced price lunch: 70%
- Ethnicity: 85% Hispanic, 5% White, 6% American Indian
- Grade Range:
  - High School: 9–12

The Cottonwood School District is a rural district covering approximately 144 square miles in the state. The school district serves both a medium-size urban area and a number of outlying communities. The total population of the district is approximately 14,568. The per capita income of the region is $15,115, with the majority of employment coming from light farming, ranching, retail, service, and tourism.

The district consists of 15 schools and employs about 300 teachers. Eighty percent of the students are bilingual. Only one school, a high school, is participating in the work in this district and it was on probationary status, according to state accountability rankings.

**Implementation of SEDL's Model**

When SEDL began working with Cottonwood School District in Fall 2001, the district identified reading as the focus for work with SEDL. The first superintendent resisted appointing a district leadership team since there were several groups already in existence charged with improvement agendas. SEDL attempted to help the district tackle state-mandated improvement efforts, hoping to connect these existing improvement efforts to SEDL's work. The first superintendent resigned at the end of the school year and a new superintendent was hired in Summer 2002. In spite of new leadership, the district became even more immersed in internal political problems and has had little energy to move forward with its work with SEDL. A district leadership team was never formed in spite of several discussions with the second superintendent.

At the high school, the previously existing school improvement committee took on the role of the school leadership team in Fall 2001. SEDL's main work with the high school committee was to help focus its school improvement plan and design a program to increase the involvement of the community with the school. SEDL conducted a workshop on how to use and interpret student data so that teachers could plan revisions to their curriculum to better meet student needs. SEDL has also conducted workshops related to literacy at the high school level and has consulted with individual teachers about reading.

**Accomplishments and Challenges**

In terms of the SEDL model, little work has been accomplished at the district level. The failure of the district to appoint a leadership team is one indicator of the district's lack of commitment to working with SEDL. SEDL's work with other district-level committees also has been slow and intermittent, suggesting a much broader problem in maintaining focus and energy. If work with SEDL is to move forward, the superintendent will need to demonstrate his commitment by appointing a district leadership team that has as its primary purpose to improve student achievement and actively support its work.

The work at the high school has not maintained a focus on reading as a major agenda. The high school team became very interested in its community outreach effort and work on literacy took a back seat. Leadership at the high school is focused on operations and management issues at the expense of instructional leadership and follow-up. Although community outreach is important, its immediate impact on student achievement is indirect at best. Administrators and teachers still need to see a focus on instruction, assessment, and achievement as integral to improving outcomes for students.

**Site: Delta Village School District**
**Focus of Work: Reading**

**General Description**

- Geographic: rural/small town
- District Size: very small (<1,000)
- School size:
  - Middle school: small (<299)
  - High school: small (<299)
- District number of teachers: very small (<75)
- Free or reduced price lunch: 80%
- Ethnicity: 90% African American, 10% White/Hispanic
- Grade range:
  - Elementary school: K-8
  - High school: 9-12

The Delta Village School District occupies 25 miles of the Mississippi Delta region. The local economy, which provides a per capita income of under $13,000, relies on agriculture and industrial work.

The participating schools, a K-8 primary school and a 9-12 high school, are not representative of the district's student population since they both have higher percentages of African American students and higher percentages of students who receive free and reduced price lunch. In addition, most teachers and principals working in the schools are African American as compared to the mostly White district office.

**Implementation of SEDL's Model**

Delta Village School District began working with SEDL in September 2002. During initial discussions, the district chose to focus on improving reading, specifically aligning the reading and writing curricula with the state framework. SEDL and Delta Village identified the root causes of its deeply entrenched literacy troubles as a lack of understanding of the importance of the state framework, the state benchmark examination, and the essential connections between curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Thus, the ultimate goal of the district's work with SEDL was to improve students' literacy skills by aligning the curriculum, instruction, and assessment to teaching and student learning in classrooms.

Two teams were formed to work collaboratively toward school improvement in literacy. This effort aligns district and school improvement plans. First, the district leadership team's representatives include the superintendent, two principals, three high school teachers, three elementary school teachers, a counselor, a computer technician, and an employee/parent. As a first order of business, the district leadership team focused on communication and "shared leadership" to enable team members to communicate openly and, during meetings, work outside of existing hierarchies. SEDL helped to address communication issues and modeled effective communication strategies and shared leadership throughout the year. Once they were able to get past the initial discomfort of working across levels, district leadership team members actively and productively participated in meetings. The district leadership team began using test data to identify weaknesses in the literacy program. While the superintendent encouraged team members

to learn how to use data, some members resisted and continue to resist. At the end of the year, the team began planning its course of action for improvement.

The second team, the district curriculum literacy team (DCLT), formed 3 months after SEDL began working with the district to oversee changes to the district's curricula in literacy and provided a direct tie to the schools (since most of the reading teachers were on the team). The team began laying the groundwork for aligning the literacy curriculum with state standards. The DCLT remained active whether or not SEDL was present, and maintained its focus on aligning and making consistent curriculum across levels. Their efforts led to the development of a working draft of the K-12 alignment for the literacy curriculum, and all K-12 teachers display the curriculum in their classrooms and teach a district-wide writing process.

**Accomplishments and Challenges**

Over time, SEDL made considerable progress in helping school and district leadership to accept multiple perspectives in the decision-making process. Initially, district and school leaders seldom communicated. Although the district leadership team met regularly, principals did not take ownership of the process and were somewhat reluctant to open up. By the end of the year, the district administrators, principals, and faculty broke through what had seemed to be a rigid top-down management and communication structure, and members of both teams communicated constructively and enthusiastically. This change bodes well for future work at the site.

The curriculum alignment work has already started paying off. Faculty members are now able to articulate their curriculum goals and how they align with state standards. In addition, faculty members are showing an increase in effort and staying after school to plan and participate in meetings.

District follow-through needs to be improved. The teams have not consistently completed assignments between meetings or held each other accountable for these assignments. This may signal that they need help in establishing accountability measures for their work together. The district also faces challenges in recruiting and retaining certified staff, as well as holding high expectations for all students. These issues will need to be addressed as the work with SEDL moves forward.

**Site: Desert Hills**
**Focus of Work: Reading**

**General Description**

- Geographic: rural outside MSA
- District size: medium (<3,001-9,999)
- School size:
  - Elementary school: small (< 299)
  - Middle school: medium (300-499)
- District number of teachers: Medium (201-500)
- Free or reduced price lunch: 94%
- Ethnicity: 49.5% Hispanic, 39% American Indian, 10.5% White
- Grade range:
  - Elementary school: K-5
  - Middle school: 6-8

Ten schools constitute the Desert Hills Public School District, including one high school, three middle schools, and six elementary schools. Poverty levels are high in the district, staff turnover is a consistent issue, and student achievement places the students in the lowest 10 percent in the state.

Almost 58 percent of students at the elementary school are designated limited English proficient and 67 percent of the students at the middle school are designated as limited English proficient.

**Implementation of SEDL's Model**

When the SEDL work began in the Desert Hills district in May 2001, the superintended unilaterally made the decision to focus on reading. Subsequently, a district level team formed, including the superintendent, the principals of all 10 schools, four teachers, and 10 central office staff. This team meets monthly and the SEDL coordinator guides the meetings. The superintendent supports the meetings, but resists any suggestions that would change the roles or responsibilities of the central office staff and their relationships with the schools.

The district leadership team conducted an exploration of the district's policies, programs, and philosophy. This extensive activity resulted in the creation of a problem statement that cited implementation of district and school improvement plans as an issue in need of attention. The team agreed that this attention should be directed by three elements—instructional leadership, data use, and professional development—all to focus on the improvement of reading. The district leadership team was divided into three groups to plan for each of the critical elements. Some plans were created and documents produced about the plans; however, the team started hedging about what they would do to implement these plans, and there has been no follow-through on this activity.

The district leadership team devoted some time to study the analysis and interpretation of data and its application to decision making for instruction. Subsequent to this session, principals were directed to replicate this work with their school staffs, which they did. A central office staff person was assigned to each school to be involved in this work to help connect district team members with school teams; this was not successful. For the rest of

the year, the leadership team continued to meet but remained inactive about the improvement of reading.

Teams formed at the elementary and middle schools. The elementary team includes the principal and teachers; parents are invited but are not active members of the team. The elementary team has met regularly and actively engages in examining their students' reading problems. The principal began serving in a proactive role, guiding and pushing the team and its work. This principal readily applies the learning gained from the site coordinator's coaching, increasing her activities in providing follow-through to the staff. As a result, Four Block, a commercial reading program adopted prior to the school's involvement with SEDL, began receiving better implementation attention.

The middle school team consists of the principal, assistant principal, and teachers. This team decided to focus its work on creating a curriculum for middle-grade literacy. During the summer, the majority of the middle school team moved out of the district for various family and other reasons, and a new group was organized at the beginning of the school year. This group is enthusiastic about their curriculum development goal and is moving productively in this work, although the work was interrupted by the change of personnel on the team.

**Accomplishments and Challenges**

The convening of a district team brought together, for the first time, a diverse district group. Prior to the district's involvement with SEDL, there had been no cross-level conversation of educators in the district. This is an important first step in initiating systemic work. In addition, the norms for meetings in the district were weak. For example, arriving at meetings promptly was not typical. The superintendent took proactive measures to develop the norm of promptness.

Toward the end of the year, a review of the work suggested that the district leadership team was too large, that the district office staff were not actively supporting the work of the schools, and that reorganizing this team would result in better focus and more efficiency and effectiveness. Plans are being made to establish a newly constituted team in January or February and to help the team develop an understanding of its roles and the purpose of its work.

A major issue and challenge articulated by both the district personnel and by the SEDL facilitators was a lack of monitoring implementation and follow-through to ensure that what has been planned does, in fact, happen. The need to address this concern was recognized, although no plans have been made to give attention to this issue.

**Site: Farmville School District**
**Focus of Work: Reading**

**General Description**

- Geographic: rural/small town
- District size: medium (1001-3000)
- School size:
  - Middle school: medium (300-499)
  - High school: medium (300-499)
- District number of teachers: small (75-200)
- Free or reduced price lunch: 79%
- Ethnicity: 90% Hispanic, 10% White
- Grade range:
  - Middle school: 6-8,
  - High school: 9-12

The Farmville School District is nestled in a small, rural community where the per capita income is just under $14,000. The local economy relies primarily on agriculture and the public school system.

The work's focus is reading achievement at Farmville Middle School and Farmville High School, where the state achievement test scores were the lowest.

**Implementation of SEDL's Model**

Farmville began participation in August 2001. With SEDL's help, Farmville identified its core problem as uneven communication of the district literacy program in each school. Thus, the focus of the work is to ensure all stakeholders are able to implement the district literacy program. Participants noted that it was "the first time the group had ever taken time to discuss educational issues" and expressed ideas and issues openly.

Three teams were established and they meet periodically. These include a district leadership team (the five school principals, the federal program director, and the superintendent), a high school leadership team (the principal and nine teachers), and a middle school team (the principal and six teachers, referred to as team leaders).

The district leadership team met fairly consistently for about half the year. The site coordinator expected the team to work on systemic improvements, specifically the district literacy program. The superintendent seldom participated, but he clearly said he wanted the team to work on management issues instead of the literacy program. In addition, when the official district liaison for the SEDL work left the district, district participation in the team decreased. The high school principal became SEDL's point of contact.

Both school teams were provided training on using data for planning. Specifically, teachers were taught where to find data and how to examine them for strengths and weaknesses in the literacy instructional program. In addition, the reading specialist provided professional development on instructional strategies in reading. The high school team moved at a very rapid pace, with its leader, the principal, pushing for immediate

change in the reading program both in plan and in practice. The middle school team was also established and met a few times before the superintendent made district-wide changes in leadership, after which the team met inconsistently. While the high school made considerable progress in its reading program, the middle school has not accomplished much. There was no concerted effort toward system-wide alignment.

**Accomplishments and Challenges**

SEDL's work progressed primarily at the high school and less so at the middle school and at the district. A major accomplishment was the site's use of data to identify student needs in literacy. SEDL provided professional development on use of data throughout the year that brought together representatives from all levels to work on a common set of issues. This was the first encounter with data for many faculty members. While faculty held a negative attitude toward the state test and did not understand how it would affect the district, the training provided them with an understanding of its importance and how to use it for planning.

Challenges were also apparent. First, changes in leadership were widespread. The superintendent reassigned two principals and replaced three others at the beginning of the year, which created confusion and friction. In the summer, friction wedged apart the superintendent and assistant superintendent (the SEDL liaison), resulting in the latter's resignation. With each change in leadership, plans for the site work were conveyed to the site again and rapport and trust had to be established anew. Each team worked at a different pace and was disconnected from the others. Thus, a continuing challenge is to engage the district and schools in this work together.

A second set of difficulties derived from district-wide wavering of a commitment to student achievement. The superintendent attempted to persuade the site coordinator to refocus the team's effort to deal with management tasks rather than systemic reading work. Although leadership implemented rules for punctuality, preparedness, and academic focus, high expectations for student achievement were not uniform across the district. Because teachers and administrators believed most students would become field harvesters, they felt that the educational services provided were futile. District expectations for student achievement will need to be addressed if work with SEDL is to progress.

**Site: Forked River School District**
**Focus of Work: Reading**

**General Description**

- Geographic: rural/small town
- District size: very small (< 1,000)
- School size:
  - Elementary: medium (350-499)
  - Secondary: medium (350-499)
- District number of teachers: very small (< 75)
- Free or reduced price lunch: 70%
- Ethnicity: 66% White, 33% African American
- Grade range: K-12

The Forked River School District is located in the rural, northeastern corner of its state. It was originally a farming community and has lost population as it has gone through rough economic times. Many of the original stores in the downtown business section have been closed and their storefronts are now occupied by other less prosperous businesses. It is slowly becoming a bedroom community to two other cities. There are signs of growth that come along with these changing demographics, with new homes and a grocery store under construction on the edges of town near the highway that leads to the two cities.The school district is now the largest employer in town.

SEDL is working with an elementary and secondary school; these are the only two schools in the district. When SEDL began working with this district, the elementary school was considered problematic because more than 70 percent of its students scored below proficient on the state accountability examination. In addition, about one fourth of the secondary students left high school before graduating. The state had also cited the district under a previous superintendent because of fiscal mismanagement and overspending.

**Implementation of SEDL's Model**

The district has focused its work with SEDL on raising student reading achievement. This work began in December 2001. As part of their district self-assessment, the administrators and faculty decided that they needed to examine specific data on student achievement in reading and build their knowledge and skills on effective strategies that can address student needs and improve reading instruction.

They organized three teams to direct and carry out this work. The first team is the district leadership team that meets monthly to plan, implement, and review the district's work. The district leadership team consists of the superintendent, two principals, and several teachers from each school. A board member and parents have served sporadically on the team; at present, the board and parents are not active members. The second team is the reading team that began meeting about 5 months after SEDL started working with the district. The reading team also meets monthly; its charge is to develop reading assessments and to serve as a "study group" for teacher professional development in

reading. The reading team consists of the elementary reading specialists, several secondary English teachers, and the two principals if they are available on the meeting day. The reading team occasionally met with the district leadership team. About 9 months into the work, SEDL began meeting monthly with the three administrators in the district (i.e., superintendent, elementary and secondary principals) to help coach and maintain their focus on reading improvement activities. SEDL also held conference calls between these monthly administrator meetings to provide additional follow-up. As a result of the work of these three teams, the district held three professional development days in reading for both the elementary and secondary schools. In addition, they developed, administered, and scored a reading assessment and are in the process of developing a second. These assessments were meant to help focus student instruction on reading. The administrators also recently identified target students at each of the state-tested grades, and teachers met regularly in grade-level groups to develop instructional and other strategies to increase the probability that these students meet proficiency benchmarks on state examinations.

**Accomplishments and Challenges**

The Forked River School District took considerable steps forward to develop and implement a plan to improve student achievement in reading. The superintendent was deeply supportive and involved in the district's work with SEDL. All three administrators and significant numbers of the faculty affirmed that the district's focus is on improving reading. As a result of the work of these three teams, the district created and administered a reading assessment to assess student strengths and weaknesses, although student tests were not quickly analyzed and used to guide instruction. The reading team worked on a second assessment, learning from their experiences from the first. The district devoted three professional development days to reading using its own staff to lead sessions—unprecedented in recent history. These all-staff professional development sessions contributed greatly to the early start of professional learning communities at the two schools. The superintendent insisted that a project be developed to continue teachers' work on improving reading over the summer.

Expectations for instruction were not set, communicated, or reinforced by the superintendent and principals. For example, the effectiveness of professional development to expand effective instructional strategies was limited without follow-through to ensure that teachers use these strategies in their classrooms. The superintendent asked both principals to spend more time in classrooms working with teachers, though all three acknowledge that they did not do this. Similarly, administering assessments without using their results is wasted effort. Also, the number of faculty and other stakeholders meaningfully engaged in the reading improvement efforts was low. Although a core group of administrators and faculty members were successfully engaged in planning and carrying out the work, too many teachers and others are weakly linked for the effort to realistically touch each classroom and student. These challenges are not unexpected or uncommon given the starting point of this district. Neither are they insurmountable. However, they demand the attention of the district leadership team, the reading team, and the administrative team if the district is to make significant progress.

**Site: High Meadows School District**
**Focus of Work: Reading**

**General Description**

- Geographic: rural/small town
- School size: both small (<299)
- District size: very small (<1,000)
- Number of teachers: very small (<75)
- Free or reduced price lunch: 85%
- Ethnicity: 55% White, 35% American Indian, 12% African American
- Grade range:
  - Elementary school: pre-K–8
  - High School: 9-12

High Meadows School District is located in the rural foothills of the state. The local industry is largely farming and ranching. The community has been in economic decline for a number of years with many families moving to larger cities for work. The district has a population of approximately 1,300 with a per capita income of $17,600.

All grade levels in this district are housed in one building serving a total of approximately 200 students. High Meadows schools have been classified as low performing by the state department of education for the past 3 years and were placed on probationary status for the 2001– 02 school year.

**Implementation of SEDL's Model**

SEDL began working with this district at the beginning of the 2001-02 school year. The main priority of the district is to raise test scores and improve student performance in reading and mathematics. (SEDL is working with reading; they have another program for math.) A district leadership team was formed including teachers, administrators, parents, and school board members, although only one parent attends the meetings on a consistent basis. In total, the district leadership team includes almost half of the faculty.

During the Systems Exploration stage, the district leadership team identified inadequate internal and external communication and the need to improve reading performance as the areas of focus. Communication was defined as communication internally between administrators and teachers about standards and curriculum work and communication externally with parents about the school and their children. More explicitly, the plan includes work in reading and the alignment of reading to standards, student discipline, school policy, and communications with parents.

As the elementary school and the high school are in the same building, teachers are available to help each other in a variety of ways, from discussing needs in the hall, to covering each other's classes, to working across grade levels for a district-sponsored tutoring program to address achievement issues. The SEDL reading specialist working with this site began leading study groups to improve content knowledge and pedagogical skills through classroom modeling at the end of the 2001-02 school year; this work was resumed at the beginning of the 2002-03 school year and continued through

December 2002. Most of the reading work has occurred at the elementary school, though reading issues have been discussed by the district leadership team as they pertain to the high school level. Little specific attention has been directed to improving reading skills in the high school.

**Accomplishments and Challenges**

The High Meadows School District has made progress in increasing teachers' classroom capacities in reading, alignment with state standards, and understanding how to plan from assessment data. SEDL field staff is still leading the majority of this work. Teachers have benefited from the help of the SEDL reading specialist, who has done classroom modeling, helped them review their curriculum, and taught them about reading strategies they might use in their classrooms. K-12 teachers and administrators on the district leadership team have looked at student data and discussed school issues as they relate to state standards, curriculum alignment, and classroom instruction across the system. They have also discussed ways to involve the community in supporting this work. Working as a group has facilitated a structure for internal communication about academic matters. The team initiated a new design for a student handbook to better help parents and students understand what the school requires.

While the work has been steady, progress has been slow, with the exception of the reading work at the elementary school. Teachers and administrators have a history of crisis management and short-term perspectives that have limited their capacity to plan and follow through. One concern for the 2002–03 school year is that they may be loosing enthusiasm for the work as demonstrated through lower attendance at the district leadership team meetings during the fall semester. This is a very small district, and the staff feel like they are constantly dealing with chaos as they continue to provide a good education to their students in the face of local politics and program and personnel cuts. Continual changes have further lessened morale.

**Site: Highway Junction School District**
**Focus of Work: Reading**

**General Description**

- Geographic: rural/small town
- District size: small (1001–3000)
- School size:
  - Elementary schools: large (>500)
- District number of teachers: small (75–200)
- Free or reduced price lunch: 90%
- Ethnicity: 80% African American, 20% White
- Grade range: pre-K–5

Highway Junction School District is located in the northeast part of the state in the flatlands. The economy is primarily agriculture and small businesses. The per capita income is $15,193.

The district has 2,641 students in two elementary, two junior highs, and two senior high schools. The two elementary schools in the district are rated as below state average in the state accountability system. One entered corrective action as it did not meet its growth target set by the state. The other exceeded its growth target in 2001 and was recognized by the state as such; however, its student achievement is still below the state average. As reading was seen as a need in both elementary schools, the district is focusing its work with SEDL around reading and raising achievement targets.

**Implementation of SEDL's Model**

SEDL staff began working with the district in late Fall 2001. Actual work with the then district leadership team of 25 people began in January 2002 but did not make good progress until spring, and then dropped off over the summer. Discussion of root causes for low performance included the need for more alignment within the system so that all students graduate; the availability of certified teachers (almost half of the teachers in the district were uncertified); and a clear reading focus in the system for the two elementary schools.

At the district level, most of the work with SEDL has focused on developing the district plan. As the district leadership team crosses the elementary and high school, and because setting community expectations for achievement was seen as an important issue, the district plan came to include strategies to ensure that: 1) all students will graduate (achievement), 2) students will have qualified teachers (recruitment of certified teachers), and 3) all stakeholders will understand and support district goals and activities. Reading across the system was implicit in the first component of the plan, though it was not explicitly added until after December 2002.

At the school level, a monthly reading cadre was established in May 2002 to focus on reading. The cadre includes one teacher per grade level, the two elementary principals, and the elementary supervisor. One goal of the cadre is to develop the capacity of its

members to support other teachers in reading. This process continued in the 2002-03 school year with reading support from specialists at SEDL and the state.

**Accomplishments and Challenges**

Raising student achievement scores has been an issue for this district for a number of years. The district has worked in conjunction with SEDL in hopes of improving their efforts and results. The district has a history of utilizing professional development as a strategy for improving teacher skills, and SEDL was able to build on that history in enhancing work with reading and teachers' understanding of working with data to plan instruction. The district is also working with another program in math which uses study groups as a professional development strategy. Teachers' familiarity with this strategy helped in their work with the reading cadre, which asks them to meet with their grade-level groups to communicate about what they have learned in cadre meetings.

District coordinators worked out a set of 6-week target skills aligned to the state standards that teachers address in lesson plans. The district provided time for grade-level meetings to work on reading target skills, as requested by the reading cadre, but other resources in the district are slim. Teachers do not have extra time to plan and often have to buy their own supplies. SEDL and the reading cadre have improved communication and teacher skills, but still face the ongoing stresses of low community resources and expectations, internally and externally, even from the community itself.

**Site: Mesa School District**
**Focus of Work: Reading**

**General Description**

- Geographic: rural/small town
- District size: medium (3,001–9,999)
- School size:
  - Middle school: small (<299)
  - High school: medium (300–499)
- District number of teachers: medium (201–500)
- Free or reduced price lunch: 95%
- Ethnicity: 99% American Indian
- Grade range:
  - Middle school: 6-8
  - High school: 9-12

Mesa School District covers a large rural area in the state. The economic base for the community is farming and ranching with some small businesses. The per capita income of the region is $18,000.

Eight of the 16 schools in the district are on probationary status according to the state. Mesa School District has a number of contextual issues that influence its involvement in school improvement efforts. First, it is large and spread out, with some rural and isolated schools. Second, its teaching staff includes a large number of teachers who commute great distances to work. As a result, many of these teachers do not engage in any after-school or extracurricular activities, even professional development. Third, an important discussion point has to do with the local aboriginal language and culture, its inclusion in curriculum, and the effect it might have on expectations for students and student performance.

**Implementation of SEDL's Model**

SEDL began work with Mesa School District in 2001 at the middle school and high school that are in the same feeder group. The Systems Exploration stage was never completed at this site, as work did not begin with the district but rather at the school level. The school improvement teams from these two schools were combined into one SEDL team that includes administrators, teachers, and parents across the two schools. SEDL is working with the schools to establish reading as a focus issue.

At the school level, SEDL staff conducted a number of training and information sessions to help teachers understand and improve their teaching of reading, regardless of grade level. They also conducted monthly school team meetings in which team members would discuss issues related to reading, literacy, and alignment to state standards. These discussions became the basis of a middle and high school plan, still under development as of December 2002. While attendance at these monthly meetings was irregular, they served to help establish trust and a good working relationship, even extending to the district level.

Work at the district level as of December 2002 has been limited. SEDL, the two schools, and the district are working with reading as a focus area. District staff felt that they were

making some progress in reading, looking at data to strengthen classroom instruction, and they initially let the two efforts remain separate. Near the end of 2001, the district office established a district reading team in support of their interest in improving reading across the district and invited SEDL to work with that team toward the same goal. The role of this team is to coordinate SEDL and the district's efforts. In 2002, SEDL established a district leadership team, composed largely of district administrators. This team was intended to work on a district plan to address reading and student achievement systemically, as designed by the SEDL model. However, both the district reading team and the district leadership team have met infrequently—most of SEDL's ongoing work was with the middle and high school combined team.

**Accomplishments and Challenges**

In the middle and high school working with SEDL, teachers have reported progress with reading skills and understandings, though engagement of teachers has varied. Because of district efforts, teachers are using the Scholastic Reading Inventory as a diagnostic tool, and SEDL has been able to use that as a basis for talking about data and reading achievement. Working with classroom skills in reading, however, and targeting standards at the middle and high school as still in early stages. Teachers have commented that they are ready for more classroom support from SEDL but have a better understanding of what they need to do.

Despite the district's wish to work systemically across schools, there is often not much meaningful coordination between the district and individual schools on how to implement change or solve problems. SEDL's approach to develop work in the middle and high school is a model for how other schools in the system might work. The district-level reading team has made some progress in looking at ways the district's emphasis on reading could align with the work that SEDL is doing. Several different approaches to reading and school reform have been started in schools across the district, but few efforts have been supported well enough to lead to actual outcomes. Toward the end of FY02, the superintendent increased the district's commitment to reading work with SEDL in mind.

**Site: Piedmont**
**Focus of Work: Reading**

**General Description**

- Geographic: rural/small town
- District size: small (1,001–3,000)
- School size:
  - Elementary school: medium (300-499)
  - High school: large (>499)
- District number of teachers: small (75–200)
- Free or reduced price lunch: 60%
- Ethnicity: 78% White, 22% Hispanic, < 1% other
- Grade range:
  - Elementary school: K-5
  - High school: 9–12

Piedmont School District is a small rural district with a growing minority population. The economic base for the community is primarily agriculture and food processing. The 2000 per capita income in the region was approximately $18,000.

The district consists of one elementary, one middle, and one high school. While the minority population of this district is growing, the faculty is non-minority with a very limited capacity for speaking the native language of their new students. The elementary and high schools were identified as the two schools to participate in the work.

**Implementation of SEDL's Model**

The district decided to focus its work with SEDL on raising student achievement in reading. The district leadership team, formed in Spring 2001, consists of the superintendent, all building principals in the district, teachers from each level (elementary, intermediate, and high school), parents, and a community business member. During the Systems Exploration stage, the district leadership team decided they needed to focus on aligning the curriculum with the state frameworks and using data to drive curriculum decisions. In addition to assisting district staff with ongoing efforts to align the curriculum with the state standards, SEDL worked closely with the district to bring all K-12 teachers together in content-area groups to begin efforts on vertical alignment. Near the end of FY02, the SEDL site coordinator began providing professional development to the director of curriculum and instruction in the central office on understanding and disaggregating test results data.

A leadership team was established at the elementary school; attempts to establish a leadership team at the high school were unsuccessful. The school-level team at the elementary school consisted of teachers from each grade and the principal; the team did not include a district representative. The work of elementary team members also focused on curriculum alignment; teachers met in grade-level teams to align their curricula with the state standards and to incorporate these standards into their lesson plans.

**Accomplishments and Challenges**

The Piedmont School District made considerable progress on curriculum alignment at both the district and elementary school levels. The vertical alignment work, although just beginning, had an additional impact on communication and collaboration in the district, as this was the first time many of the content-area teachers had ever worked together. This was an enlightening experience for many of the teachers regarding the congruence of the concepts across the grade levels, highlighting the need for vertical alignment.

Near the end of FY02, the district staff also began exploring how to analyze and interpret student achievement data. Inasmuch as this district had not analyzed student achievement data prior to working with SEDL, this was an important step toward achieving the objective of using data to direct instructional decisions.

The work in the Piedmont School District was slowed slightly by a change in administration during Summer 2002. This change included not only a new superintendent, but also new principals. In spite of this major change in administration, progress continued on curriculum alignment and on professional development for elementary teachers in reading. These changes in leadership did slow the process and will require time for administrators and teachers to regroup, build relationships, and learn how to work together.

**Site: River City**
**Focus of Work: Math**

**General Description**

- Geographic: midsize city
- District size: large (>10,000)
- School size:
  - Elementary school 1: medium (300-499)
  - Elementary school 2: medium (300-499)
- District number of teachers: large (>500)
- Free or reduced price lunch: 73%
- Ethnicity: 88% African American, 12% White, <1% other.
- Grade range:
  - Elementary school 1: pre-K-6
  - Elementary school 2: pre-K, 3-5

River City School District is a large city-wide school district. The economic base for this community is mixed, including manufacturing, retail, education, health, and social services, and other service industries. The 2000 per capita income in the region was approximately $23,000.

The participating schools were selected because they were identified as low performing by the state department of education. These two schools are not representative of the district; almost all students in both schools are minority and are eligible for free or reduced priced lunches.

**Implementation of SEDL's Model**

This district began working with SEDL in Winter 2001 and decided to focus its work on raising achievement scores in mathematics. The district leadership team (consisting of the superintendent, three central office directors, the principals of all schools in the district, and, where the principals have invited them, assistant principals) identified inconsistent implementation of the district's curriculum as one factor contributing to low student performance and decided to focus the work at the district level on implementing the district's written curriculum.

The two schools SEDL is working with were placed on the state's low-performing list following the 2000-01 school year. Low-performing schools are required to participate in a state-mandated improvement program and review process. SEDL staff worked with the district and the schools to align the state-mandated improvement process with SEDL's *Working Systemically* model. At the school level, a math study group was established during Fall 2002 to improve teacher content knowledge and pedagogical skills. This team includes several teachers from three elementary schools and a math specialist from the district office. This team meets monthly, and a math specialist from SEDL leads the teachers in modeling classroom instruction strategies.

**Accomplishments and Challenges**

When SEDL began working with River City, there was very little communication between the central office and the schools. By the end of FY02, the district had made considerable progress in breaking down the barriers to communication; regular dialogue began to occur between the school administrators and the central office staff. The participation of the district mathematics specialist in the mathematics study group served to improve communication between the central office and school personnel at the two elementary schools. Open channels of communication throughout the district are essential for systemic work to proceed.

The district leadership team has worked toward developing a plan to monitor and ensure that the district's curriculum is being taught. In December, they began to develop an innovation configuration that depicts what the district would look like once the curriculum is fully implemented. Work on the innovation configuration will be completed early in FY03.

The slow pace of the work is an issue in this district. This slow pace may be due in part to the amount of time the SEDL staff had to devote to building trust before progress could be made. Follow-through is another area of concern. While the superintendent expresses high expectations for improved student performance, it appears that there is no follow-through to determine if those expectations are met. In other words, there is no accountability for principals for implementing district initiatives. This also carries down to the school level in that it is not clear how principals hold the teachers accountable for implementing the district's curriculum in their classrooms.

**Site: Southwest City School**
**Focus of Work: Reading**

**General Description**

- Geographic: central city
- District size: very small (<1000)
- School size: small (< 299)
- District number of teachers: very small (< 75)
- Free or reduced price lunch: 66%
- Ethnicity: 60% African American, 33% Hispanic, remaining White or other
- Grade range: Pre-K-6

This site is a small charter school located in an urban center in the Southwest. The local economy is service-based.

The charter school went through significant changes in administration, faculty, and students between its first and second years working with SEDL. At the start of the 2002-03 school year, 250 students were enrolled in the charter school; 70 percent were new to the school. The district has consistently been unable to recruit certified teachers; a the present time, only two of the 14 teachers are certified. The school administered a standardized test battery in September 2002. The results showed that students in grades K-1 scored at or above grade levels in reading, students in grades 2-3 scored approximately one grade level behind, and students in grades 4-6 lag even more behind in achievement.

**Implementation of SEDL's Model**

The district focused its work with SEDL on raising student achievement in reading. This work began in May 2001. About 1 year into the work, the superintendent resigned his position and many of the teachers' contracts were not renewed for the coming school year. SEDL's work with this district stalled for almost 5 months while a new superintendent and principal were hired, teacher vacancies were filled, and a new group of students was recruited. This large turnover of leadership, faculty, and students translated into significant challenges for both the district and SEDL. In many respects, SEDL's work in this district has had to start over to bring both leadership and faculty up to speed. As of December 2002, a district leadership team was functioning that consisted of the superintendent, principal, lead teachers for each of the two floors of the school, and a third teacher who will serve as the lead when the second school reopens. Prior to the turnover of leadership, the district leadership team had completed its self-assessment and focused its work on increasing the professionalism and leadership available to support student learning. With difficulties in recruiting certified teachers, the site focused on increasing current teacher knowledge and skills in effective pedagogy and leadership to support these efforts. In addition to the district leadership team, two cross-grade groups were formed (grades pre-K-2 and grades 3-6) that met regularly with SEDL. The cross-grade groups focused their efforts on improving student achievement in reading.

**Accomplishments and Challenges**

This district faced tremendous challenges in improving its student achievement in reading. The dramatic turnover in leadership and faculty seriously interrupted the pace of work. The new administrators and faculty basically started over at the same time they faced increasing state accountability requirements that threaten the district's future if significant numbers of students do not meet state benchmarks. This is a real possibility given the student achievement results reported above.

Over four fifths of the faculty are not certified and have limited pedagogical understanding and instructional strategies. Nevertheless, both the district team and two cross-grade groups were eager to move forward and strengthen reading instruction and achievement. With SEDL's help, they analyzed available test scores and, by the end of FY02, had a clear picture of where students are and the gaps that need to be filled. SEDL also worked with the cross-grade groups to deepen their knowledge of effective reading strategies and incorporate these strategies into their classroom instruction that typically adheres closely to their basal reading series. The challenge will be to support teachers to use these reading strategies in their classrooms to meet student needs as well as to work with leadership to support and monitor teachers efforts.

In addition to their work on reading, the district decided to survey all stakeholders to determine what the expectations are for staff and students; expectations were not clear for either in FY02. The survey results will be used to build consensus and understanding about the expectations for both and develop a plan to support teachers and students in meeting these expectations. SEDL also plans to review work completed in the first year with the district team and cross-grade teams to build ownership and commitment to the scope of work previously laid out.

**Site: Washington City**
**Focus of Work: Reading**

**General Description**

- Geographic: central city
- District size: large (>10,000)
- School size:
  - Elementary school: large (> 500)
  - High school: large (>500)
- District number of teachers: large (>500)
- Free or reduced price lunch: 48%
- Ethnicity: 47% White, 42% Hispanic, 10% African American, 1% other
- Grade range:
  - Elementary school: K-6
  - Freshman high school: 9

Washington City School District is a large city-wide district located in a metropolitan area. The economic base is comprised of light and heavy industry and services. The 2000 per capita income in the region was approximately $21,500.

Two schools were initially identified to participate in this work. Both schools were rated as acceptable on the state-mandated criterion reference test administered in Spring 2001. The elementary school dropped out of the study after the 2001-02 school year because it received the highest accountability rating possible. The intention was to identify a replacement elementary school. However, due to local issues, this did not occur during the timeframe covered in this report.

**Implementation of SEDL's Model**

The district selected reading as the focus of its work when it began working with SEDL in Summer 2001. During the Systems Exploration stage, a district-level team that consisted of the superintendent for curriculum and instruction, the district-level curriculum specialists, and the principals from the two participating schools (not constituted as a district leadership team) decided that the work with SEDL should focus on aligning the curriculum across the system. The team wanted to do this because a recent curriculum audit commissioned by the superintendent revealed that many teachers were not teaching the district's curriculum. Although the district-level team completed the District Self-Assessment and identified a focus for the work, they did not progress through the rest of the Systems Exploration stage and identify the underlying cause for the limited implementation of the district's curriculum or develop a plan on how to address this issue.

Little work was accomplished at the school level in Washington City. At the elementary school, the principal resisted attempts by the site coordinator to schedule working meetings to establish a school leadership team and move forward. At the freshman high school, a school leadership team was formed from the existing school improvement team; there is not a district representative on this team. Progress of the work at the latter school may have been slowed in an effort to not stir up other issues before the passage of an upcoming bond issue.

**Accomplishments and Challenges**

When SEDL began working with Washington City, the curriculum and instruction staff worked in isolation. The formation of the district-level committee provided an environment for these individuals to begin communicating and working together, and has resulted in improved communication among the members of the district team.

Very little progress was made in this district during the past year, primarily due to an upcoming bond issue that took priority over work with SEDL. A district leadership team was not named until the end of FY02, 1 year into the process. The district also resisted repeated requests during the second half of the year to select a replacement site for the original elementary school; one was selected in December. In addition, there were long periods of time when no meetings occurred between SEDL and the school district. The site coordinator is attempting to get a firm date scheduled for the first meeting of the newly named district leadership team as soon as possible so they can move the process forward at the district level. At the school level, plans had not been confirmed by the end of FY02 for starting work at the new elementary school. Specific plans, however, were made to begin intensive work at the freshman high school focused on reading in January.

**Site: Wrightsville**
**Focus of Work: Reading**

**General Description**

- Geographic: rural
- District size: medium (3,001-9,999)
- School size:
  - Elementary school: small (<300)
- District number of teachers: medium (201-500)
- Free or reduced price lunch: 45%
- Ethnicity: 63% White, 20% Hispanic, 13% African American, 2% other.
- Grade range:
  - Elementary school 1: K-5

Wrightsville School District is a medium-size city-wide district. The community has a diverse economic base consisting of agriculture, food processing, and military. The per capita income in 2000 was approximately $21,500.

Only one elementary school elected to participate in this work; this elementary school did not achieve adequate growth in reading among its Title I students. This school is not representative of the district overall; the student body is approximately 90 percent minority, and over 95 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced price lunches.

**Implementation of SEDL's Model**

The district started working with SEDL in Summer 2001, with the intention of focusing on improving student reading achievement. The superintendent decided to use his administrative cabinet as the district leadership team; the cabinet consisted of the superintendent, the district curriculum coordinator, and all building principals. It met monthly, but its agenda typically revolved around operational issues (e.g., building, facilities, personnel), not instructional issues.

During the Systems Exploration stage, the district leadership team decided that the district needed to focus on learning to use data from the various student assessments (state- and district-developed tests as well as a national norm-referenced test) to monitor the progress of every student and to guide instruction. The district leadership team decided to concentrate initially on using locally developed tests to identify student weaknesses that needed to be targeted in instruction. After the results of Fall 2002 pre-test were available, SEDL staff began mentoring and coaching the members of the district leadership team on how to disaggregate and analyze the results. The principals on the district leadership team were instructed to take these results back to their schools and work with their teachers to determine areas to concentrate instruction for improvement.

SEDL's *Working Systemically* model also calls for a leadership team at the school level. The site coordinator established a strong mentoring relationship with the principal of the elementary school and has provided guidance and one-on-one coaching. He also has helped the elementary school principal understand the model and the importance of

establishing a leadership team at his school. However, a leadership team at the school level was not formed.

**Accomplishments and Challenges**

The Wrightsville School District made progress toward achieving its goal of learning to use data to monitor and guide student performance. SEDL staff worked closely with district leadership team members to disaggregate and analyze student test data. The district leadership team used the results of these analyses to work with teachers in their respective buildings to identify student needs and develop lesson plans to address these needs. However, it is not clear how principals followed up to determine whether the lessons were implemented or had any impact on student learning.

A challenge facing this district is the pace of the work. The work in Wrightsville slowed somewhat during Fall 2002 because of the unexpected resignation of the superintendent. Both the previous superintendent and the new superintendent (appointed from within the ranks) support SEDL's work in the district. The new superintendent will need to clearly communicate his continued support so that the pace increases. To date, there has been no progress at the school level in Wrightsville. Meaningful work at the school level will also need to begin promptly if SEDL's model is to be tested in this site.

# Appendix D

## Additional Data Summary Tables

Table 18
*Working Systemically* Model Components Addressed by Site

| Component | Not addressed | Included in discussions but no action taken | Specifically addressed: SEDL is leading any work undertaken | Specifically addressed; SEDL and site are playing active roles in work undertaken | Specifically addressed; site is leading work and SEDL is playing supportive role |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Standards** | Athens<br>Bricktown<br>Cottonwood<br>Forked River<br>River City<br>Southwest City<br>Wrightsville | Desert Hills<br>Farmville<br>Mesa | Bayou City<br>Delta Village<br>High Meadow<br>Piedmont<br>Wash City | Highway Junction | |
| **Curriculum and instruction** | Athens | Cottonwood<br>Mesa<br>Wrightsville | Bayou City<br>Delta Village<br>Desert Hills<br>Farmville<br>Forked River<br>High Meadow<br>River City<br>Southwest City<br>Washington City | Bricktown<br>Highway Junction<br>Piedmont | |
| **Assessment** | Piedmont<br>River City<br>Washington City | Cottonwood<br>Mesa | Athens<br>Bayou City<br>Delta Village<br>Desert Hills<br>Farmville<br>High Meadows<br>Highway Junction<br>Southwest City<br>Wrightsville | Bricktown<br>Forked River | |
| **Policy and governance** | Athens<br>Bayou City<br>Bricktown<br>Cottonwood<br>Delta Village<br>Desert Hills<br>Farmville<br>Forked River<br>High Meadows<br>Mesa<br>Piedmont<br>River City<br>Southwest City<br>Washington City<br>Wrightsville | | | Highway Junction | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Professional staff** | Bayou City<br>Farmville<br>Mesa<br>Washington City | Athens<br>Cottonwood<br>Wrightsville | Delta Village<br>Desert Hills<br>High Meadows<br>Piedmont<br>River City<br>Southwest City | Forked River<br>Highway Junction | Bricktown |
| **Resources** | Athens<br>Bayou City<br>Bricktown<br>Cottonwood<br>Delta Village<br>Desert Hills<br>Farmville<br>Forked River<br>High Meadows<br>Mesa<br>Piedmont<br>River City<br>Southwest City<br>Washington City<br>Wrightsville | | | Highway Junction | |
| **Family and community** | Athens<br>Bayou City<br>Bricktown<br>Delta Village<br>Desert Hills<br>Farmville<br>Forked River<br>Piedmont<br>River City<br>Southwest City<br>Washington City<br>Wrightsville | Cottonwood<br>Mesa | | High Meadow<br>Highway Junction | |

Table 19
*Working Systemically* Model Competencies Addressed by Site

| Competency | Not addressed | Included in discussions but no action taken | Specifically addressed; SEDL is leading any work undertaken | Specifically addressed; SEDL and site are playing active roles in work undertaken | Specifically addressed; site is leading work and SEDL is playing supportive role |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Collecting, using, and interpreting data** | River City<br>Wash City | | Athens<br>Bayou City<br>Cottonwood<br>Delta Village<br>High Meadows<br>Hwy Junction<br>Mesa<br>Piedmont<br>Southwest City<br>Wrightsville | Bricktown<br>Desert Hills<br>Farmville<br>Forked River | |
| **Creating coherence** | Athens<br>Wrightsville | Cottonwood<br>Delta Village<br>Mesa | Bayou City<br>Desert Hills<br>Farmville<br>High Meadows<br>River City<br>Wash City | Bricktown<br>Forked River<br>Highway Junction<br>Piedmont<br>Southwest City | |
| **Forging alliances** | Athens<br>SW City | Wash City | Bayou City<br>Cottonwood<br>Delta Village<br>Desert Hills<br>Farmville<br>High Meadows<br>Mesa<br>Piedmont<br>River City<br>Wash City<br>Wrightsville | Bricktown<br>Forked River | |
| **Building capacity** | | | Athens<br>Cottonwood<br>Delta Village<br>Desert Hills<br>Farmville<br>High Meadows<br>Mesa<br>Piedmont<br>River City<br>Southwest City<br>Wash City<br>Wrightsville | Bayou City<br>Forked River<br>Highway Junction | Bricktown |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Promoting innovation** | Athens<br>Bayou City<br>Bricktown<br>Cottonwood<br>Delta Village<br>Desert Hills<br>Farmville<br>Forked River<br>High Meadows<br>Mesa<br>Piedmont<br>River City<br>SW City<br>Wash City<br>Wrightsville | | Hwy Junction | | |

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